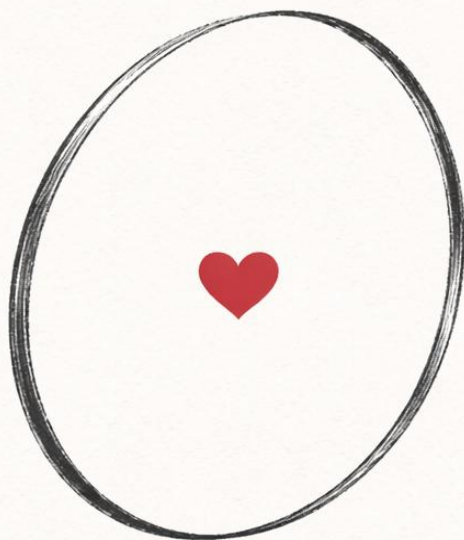




Why is **zero**
called love?

ALBA PRATALIA

WHY IS ZERO
CALLED LOVE?

Alba Pratalia

It was a traditional Frithurday morningnoon at the Alvaro Diderot residence.

Which is to say: time had given up trying.

For a household founded on day-drinking and morning drugs, this was not chaos. This was routine. Frithurday was not a day so much as a condition—an elastic strip of hours stretched between the expectancy of Thursday turning into Friday o'clock, Friday being booze o'clock, and Saturday being that awkward pause where Sunday hasn't yet filed its complaint. A temporal cul-de-sac. A bureaucratic loophole in the calendar.

Clocks in the house were decorative. Some ran backward. One was convinced it was a barometer. None agreed with the sun.

Morningnoon, on the other hand, was a physiological agreement. The body wakes up.

The conscience does not. Coffee is present, but only as a delivery system. Pills are taken “to take the edge off,” though no one could quite remember which edge had been bothering them in the first place. Cigarettes are lit not because anyone wants one, but because hands require occupation during thinking.

As we said—sum day drinking with morning drugs.

That’s what you get.

Not hangovers, mind you. Those imply regret, memory, and a past worth revisiting. What you get instead is a mild philosophical wobble, a sense that the room is judging you softly, and the unshakable conviction that if you don’t start the day improperly, it might spiral into responsibility.

So glasses clinked gently against countertops. The air smelled faintly of citrus, smoke, and decisions postponed. Somewhere, a radio murmured a song it did not believe in. The day had begun, insofar as anyone was willing to admit such a thing.

And that—precisely that—was the situation.

Diderot was trying his hardest not to wake up, but the feud between Borges and Pascal was unsettable.

Borges insisted on baking edibles brownies-like, flavor of pepperoni pizza. He argued from first principles, which in his case meant memory fragments, smells, and a deep mistrust of anything that did not require chewing. He paced the kitchen with the confidence of someone who had once dreamt of an oven and now considered himself certified. Pizza, he

claimed, was universal. Pizza was justice. Pizza had edges.

Pascal only heard about gummy-like edibles, flavor of salmon croissant. He had never seen one. He had never tasted one. This did not trouble him. His certainty came from contempt, not evidence. Gummies were silent. Sophisticated. They did not announce themselves with heat or ambition. Also, fish belonged in pastries. This was self-evident and needed no further discussion.

Diderot, meanwhile, was almost—almost—making sense of a sentence he had read a week earlier on page 347 of *A Theory of Justice*. He had been thinking about it ever since. Not the argument as a whole, no. Just one sentence. A sentence with too many clauses and not

enough mercy. He had reached the point where the sentence seemed to be thinking him back.

Something about fairness. Something about original positions. Something about choosing rules while blindfolded, which struck Diderot as optimistic bordering on cruel. He was on the verge of insight, or at least a tolerable misunderstanding.

Then Borges barked the word oregano like an accusation.

Pascal flicked his tail with surgical disdain. The tail said: you are confusing hunger with morality. The tail was correct.

Diderot sighed, which in his condition counted as civic engagement. The sentence dissolved. Page 347 retreated again into the fog where all important thoughts go to wait until you are slightly worse off. He opened one eye, then

closed it again, as if renegotiating with consciousness.

The edibles feud had won.

Justice, once more, would have to wait.

Borges insisted the pepperoni should be layered before the cheese, so that the cheese would sit on top, melt over it, and not dry it out—forgetting completely that he was talking about pizza-flavored edibles, not actual pizza. His argument involved gravity, protection, and something about mercy. None of it applied. All of it was delivered with the grave authority of someone who once watched a cooking show through a wall.

Pascal, on the other hand, would hear nothing other than that, between the croissant cut in half, sliced salmon must have been previously marinated with dill. Dill was non-negotiable.

Dill was civilization. Without dill, what you had was chaos pretending to be food. He spoke as if he had been raised in a household of traditional Latvian cuisine, which he had not, but the tone suggested generations of stern grandmothers and knives washed immediately after use.

Diderot stood up from the bed muttering about using the veil of ignorance to hide behind and give both the cat and the dog a well-deserved dose of police-like coshing. This was not a threat so much as a conceptual plan. He did not move toward them. He moved toward the idea of moving toward them. Philosophy, after all, is violence deferred by vocabulary.

His head throbbed with fairness. His mouth tasted like yesterday. The argument continued without him, perfectly capable of sustaining

itself indefinitely, like a machine designed to produce disagreement from nothing.

So, just another Frithurday morningnoon at the Diderot residence.

Then the doorbell rang.

And they all knew what was going to happen.

Pascal didn't even look up. His ears twitched with the satisfaction of a gambler who bets on rain during a flood.

"I bet on man dying on our doorstep but not dead yet," he said. "He collapses into Alvaro's arms, bleeds tastefully, mutters his last words as a riddle. Something involving time, mirrors, or bread."

Borges wagged his tail, excited by escalation. "I add this: he's alive when Alvaro opens the door. Then he gets stabbed in the back. No—better.

A dagger is thrown from afar. Clean arc. Gets him in the back as Alvaro opens the door. Same ending. Collapses into Alvaro's arms. Dies telling a riddle. Possibly inaccurate."

Alvaro rubbed his face with both hands, already tired of a future that had not yet happened.

"Couldn't he be just dead on the floor already?"

Silence.

Then both Pascal and Borges blew a raspberry in perfect, humiliating unison.

"Boooooo."

Alvaro sighed. The doorbell rang again.

It was no man.

It was a seal puppy.

Not dying. Not almost. Very decisively past the negotiation phase. Clubbed, as tradition grimly insists—tradition being one of those human inventions nobody remembers inventing but everyone is eager to defend. The body was arranged with professional indifference, the kind that implies commerce. This was not a crime of passion. This was supply chain logic.

As tradition also wanted—don't ask which tradition, it gets offended easily—it had a dagger in its back (yes, seals have a back; stop being difficult). The dagger pinned a piece of paper, like a note on a fridge nobody should ever open.

The paper was written in glittered ink.
Glittered. No irony survives glitter.

It read:

“Weltanschauung.”

Pascal stared. Borges sniffed. Alvaro blinked once, slowly, like a man filing a formal complaint against reality.

Nobody collapsed into anyone's arms.

Nobody uttered a riddle.

And somehow—this was worse.

Pascal lifted a paw, pressed an imaginary button.

“Alvaro, I have John Tiburty on line one.”

Diderot squinted at the ceiling, as if it might veto the call. “Put it on speaker.”

What came out was not John.

“Diderot—not you right now. John is—”

A boom detonated through the phone. No video, yet everyone saw it. The sound of debris.

A woman ducking by instinct refined through marriage.

“John! Extinguish your coat. Your coat.”

A pause. Fire, unmistakably offended.

“Diderot, really, I have to go. Figure it out, whatever it is. John, no—that’s your student’s PhD dissertation, you can’t use it as a fire suppressant! John, I said—”

Tuuu-tuuu-tuuu.

Dead line. Not dramatic. Administrative.

Borges tilted his head. “Well. Tiburty’s in his normal at least.”

Pascal considered the phone, then the seal, then the glitter note. “Want me to call—”

“Don’t call anyone,” Diderot said. “Especially not PETA.”

He knelt, already regretting the kneeling, and sighed at the seal puppy like a man apologizing to a mess the universe had left on his carpet.

“Help me bury this poor thing. And make martinis. Lots of martinis.”

He stood, resolved. “We’ll need ’em.”

Frithurday, after all, had expectations to meet.

A bathtub with capacity of 150 l is filled with 50 dm³ of water. The tap is open and flows in 3 l/min. The drain is open and releases to the sewage 240 l/h. In how much time will the bathtub will be filled to the brim?

- a) 2 hours.
- b) 20 minutes.
- c) 2 days.
- d) the tub will never get filled.

50 dm³ = 50 litres, but this is useless data.

$$240 \text{ l/h} = 240/60 = 4 \text{ l/min}$$

So the inflow is 3 l/h and the outflow is 4 l/h, that corresponds to simply outflow of 1 l/min. This means the tub will never get filled and actually will drain out completely in 50 minutes.

Well.

Substitute the tap with Borges and Pascal's combined martini production capacity, and the drain with Alvaro's drinking speed. Leave the values intact. Mathematics, like morality, does not bend for sentiment.

The result was obvious and cruel: Alvaro drained martinis faster than a dog and a cat—however motivated, however well-meaning—could possibly produce them. Worse still,

Borges and Pascal would very much like to indulge in martinis as well, which introduced an internal leakage nobody had accounted for in the original model.

A negative balance. Perpetual sobriety by arithmetic.

This would not stand.

They raised the phone.

All three at once, harmonized by desperation and gin deficiency:

“Students! Summon here on the double. You’re on martini duty.”

There was no explanation. None was needed. The word martini functions in academia the way blood does in the ocean.

Less than a quarter of an hour later, the living room had acquired that peculiar smell of citrus,

juniper, ambition, and unreciprocated hope.
Alvaro, Borges, and Pascal were sloth-laying on
the couch—distributed inefficiently, like
aristocracy—while students hovered, eager,
shaking, pouring, garnishing.

Hands trembled as olives were skewered. Eyes
shone with the promise of extracurricular
credits. Somewhere, a doctoral candidate dared
to imagine—maybe—their dissertation would
be read. Perhaps even annotated. A margin
note. A sigh. A nod. A dream so vain it
bordered on performance art.

Alvaro drank.

Borges drank.

Pascal drank (judiciously, with contempt).

The system stabilized.

The bathtub would never be filled.

But the couch—briefly, gloriously—was.

Alvaro raised a hand and said, “Samuel.”

The students looked at each other. There were, inconveniently, several Samuels. One specialized in ethics. One in semiotics. One had chosen the name recently and was still correcting people gently. Fate hesitated.

Alvaro continued, eyes half-closed, voice ceremonial and lazy:

“Weltanschauung. Context. Exegesis.
Compared analysis. Go, go, go!”

All heads turned toward the PhD students.

There is always a moment like this in academia: the instant when a crowd silently elects a sacrifice. One Samuel—taller than average, thinner than confidence, armed with footnotes—felt the weight descend upon him.

The others relaxed immediately, grateful to remain theoretical.

Samuel cleared his throat. This was his moment. Or at least a moment adjacent to it.

“Well,” he began, stepping forward with the careful enthusiasm of someone who believes eccentricity is a pedagogical strategy, “Weltanschauung is, of course, the German term for a comprehensive worldview—an interpretative framework through which reality is filtered, organized, and rendered meaningful.”

Alvaro nodded once. A martini appeared in his hand, somehow.

“In context,” Samuel continued, encouraged, “the term emerges prominently in nineteenth-century German philosophy, though it gains broader cultural traction in thinkers concerned

with the limits of reason, subjectivity, and historical embeddedness. One does not merely have a worldview; one inhabits it, often unconsciously.”

Pascal blinked slowly. Borges wagged his tail. Both looked like tenure committees.

“For exegesis,” Samuel said, warming up now, “the word resists strict definition. It is not ideology, not belief, not doctrine, but the pre-theoretical background against which those things become possible. It structures perception itself. What appears natural. What appears unthinkable.”

He paused, daring to breathe.

“As for comparative analysis,” he went on, “we might contrast *Weltanschauung* with, say, the Anglo-American emphasis on discrete arguments or the French focus on epistemic

ruptures. The German tradition—if I may generalize irresponsibly—assumes totality. Systems. The unbearable seriousness of coherence.”

He smiled, hoping that was endearing.

“In short,” Samuel concluded,
“Weltanschauung names the invisible architecture of meaning. You don’t see it. You live inside it. And most conflicts arise not from disagreement within a worldview, but from collision between different ones.”

Silence.

Alvaro took a sip. Considered. Then nodded again, slowly, as if approving a wine, a thesis, or a firing squad.

“Acceptable,” he said.

Samuel exhaled, victorious, unaware that
somewhere very nearby, reality had recently
included a dagger, glitter ink, and a seal puppy.
He returned to the group glowing faintly,
already revising his dissertation
acknowledgments in his head.

Frithurday morningnoon continued, perfectly
misaligned.

Alvaro swirled the martini, inspected it against
the light like a jeweler appraising a forgery,
then nodded once.

“So, yes. This martini is acceptable.”

Relief rippled through the room. Citrus
breathed again.

“As for you, Samuel,” Alvaro went on, without
turning his head, “failed. Try next semester.”

The air collapsed.

Samuel froze mid-pride. His smile stayed up for a second too long, like a bad painting. Someone quietly removed his olive privileges.

“Some other Samuel,” Alvaro added, now turning slightly, “who can actually get some meaning out of Weltanschauung other than the Wikipedia page?”

A different Samuel flinched. Then another. The room began to resemble a badly cast production of *Waiting for Godot*, but with footnotes.

A hand rose. Tentative. This Samuel did not smile.

“Sir,” he said, “may I?”

Alvaro gestured vaguely, a motion that could mean proceed or fetch ice. The Samuel chose courage.

“Weltanschauung,” he said, “is what makes you mistake your habits for nature. It’s why you think your disgust is universal, your preferences rational, your childhood normal. It’s the reason two intelligent people can look at the same fact and feel morally insulted in opposite directions.”

Pascal’s tail stopped mid-flick.

Borges leaned forward.

“It’s not what you think,” the Samuel continued. “It’s what makes thinking feel inevitable. You don’t argue from it—you argue inside it. And when it cracks, you don’t change your mind. You panic.”

Silence again. This one heavier. Productive.

Alvaro took a sip. Another. He did not nod.

“Hm,” he said at last. “Still wrong.”

The Samuel's shoulders fell.

“But,” Alvaro added, “wrong in an interesting direction. You may pour.”

The Samuel brightened instantly and reached for the shaker, promoted not to wisdom, but to utility—the highest academic rank.

The first Samuel sat down slowly, already drafting an email titled Clarification Regarding Today's Seminar. No one would read it.

Frithurday morningnoon advanced exactly one inch.

Alvaro sighed, the sigh of a man auditing reality and finding accounting errors.

“How many other Samuels do I have to fail?” he asked. “Do we have any Ishmael around?”

A pause.

Then a hand rose.

“Name’s Sarah,” the student said. “But call me Ishmael.”

A beat.

Alvaro nodded.

Borges nodded.

Pascal nodded.

Approval, unanimous and irrevocable.

Sarah-Ishmael stepped forward, unhurried, as if the room had been waiting specifically for this syntactic adjustment.

“Call me Ishmael,” she said, not quoting so much as establishing jurisdiction. “Which already tells you everything Weltanschauung does best: it doesn’t argue. It frames. It opens

with an assumption and dares you to keep reading.”

She accepted a martini without asking. Correct instinct.

“A worldview,” she went on, “is not a set of beliefs. It’s a narrative voice. You don’t notice it until something speaks in the wrong tense. That’s when you feel discomfort and call it error, heresy, or bad taste.”

Borges thumped his tail once. Pascal blinked approval.

“Context,” Sarah-Ishmael continued, “is why the same word can be philosophy, threat, or joke depending on who says it and who’s listening. Exegesis is just what we do when we pretend the frame is optional. Compared analysis is when we discover that everyone else’s frame feels like propaganda.”

She paused, then smiled faintly.

“Weltanschauung is why you think you are neutral.”

Silence.

Not the awkward kind. The kind that sits down.

Alvaro raised his glass.

“Pass,” he said. “Pour.”

Sarah-Ishmael poured. Perfectly.

Pascal squinted at the room, ears angled like precision instruments.

“So, after all this,” he said, “what is the BS density in this room right now?”

Borges sniffed the air, circled once, and sat.

“If we open a window,” he said, “we might actually reverse entropy.”

Alvaro leaned back, martini balanced with the tired mastery of a man who has given up on pedagogy but not on gin.

“Yeah. Give a student a page, they might learn something. Give them a textbook, they become this martini-making, credit-gatherer crowd of muppets.”

He waved vaguely at the room.

“Mahna mahna.”

The students, obedient to forces older than reason, replied in chorus:

“Du-du du-duru.”

Alvaro raised his glass a final inch.

“Q.E.D.”

Then:

FIIIIIIIII—

Looney-Tunes long. Elastic. Hopeful in the first half, regretful in the second.

Then, from above, from roof:

DABONG-SPLAT-SQUISH.

All heads tilted up in perfect academic synchrony.

Borges squinted. “Well,” he said, “reinforcing the roof against anti-objects and bodies falling from the sky just paid its investment.”

Pascal checked an invisible watch. “Should be coming down right now.”

Right on cue, human goo began its descent.

Not metaphorical. Actual marmaladed humanity. Flesh and fluids losing all interest in remaining upstairs. It seeped from the roof edge, explored the gutter, then chose gravity with enthusiasm. It slid along the façade and

smear the windows like a bad abstract
expressionist having a nervous breakdown.

Blob-squish. Sguash.

A thicker portion followed—decisive,
committed.

It rolled.

Roll-gush. Roll-gush. Fall.

SPLAQUISH.

Silence. Except for dripping. And one blender-
like sound the universe makes when it's
embarrassed.

A student raised a hand. Of course.

“Will this be in the finals?”

Alvaro didn't even look up. He sipped.

“Yes,” he said. “Also: now—finally—this is
coming together as familiar again.”

He leaned back.

Frithurday morningnoon reasserted itself.

Alvaro set his glass down with ceremonial finality.

“Now,” he said, “who’s going to examine the corpse remains outside?”

The word examine had not yet finished echoing when the students fled.

Not exited. Fled.

One bolted so fast he achieved temporary dematerialization, leaving behind a cloud of smoke and a door-shaped hole perfectly matching his body, glasses and all. Others evaporated down stairwells, through windows, into academic emails already being drafted titled Family Emergency. Somewhere, a

backpack hit the floor and was immediately disowned.

Silence returned. Honest, empty silence.

Borges looked around. Counted. Recounted.

“So,” he said, “it remains you two.”

Pascal nodded. “Indeed. You, Alvaro.”

Alvaro stared at them. Long. Carefully. Like a man reading a contract written in urine.

“We are ALL going,” he said at last. “Okay? You pusillanimous duo.”

Pascal yawned. Borges wagged once, betrayed by loyalty.

They stood. Slowly. With the gravity of creatures who know the universe is unfair but still insists on participation.

Outside, gravity continued doing what gravity does best.

Frithurday morningnoon moved forward another inch, dragging everyone with it.

The squashed body was··· a squashed body.

Squashed and all. In pieces. In human marmalade everywhere, as if gravity had tried to make jam and lost patience halfway through. The ribcage lay open like an old pirate treasure chest—hinged, dramatic, and profoundly disappointing. No gold. No jewels. Just organs that had clearly not signed up for exposure.

Limbs were half attached, half gooed, indecisive even in death. An arm still pretended to be anatomical. A leg had surrendered entirely to physics.

But naked.

Unmistakably naked.

No clothes. No pockets. No wallet. No phone.
No watch. Nothing that wanted to be
identified. Just skin, or what used to be skin,
before it became a suggestion.

The head—if one insisted on calling it that—
was the squashedest of squashed. Face gone.
Brain redistributed generously across nearby
surfaces. Any hope of expression had been
preemptively denied.

Alvaro looked. Took it in. Nodded, like a man
checking a grocery list.

“So, yes,” he said calmly. “Once again.”

He gestured vaguely at the remains.

“Look out for topless lady dwarves.”

So a vehicle siren played.

But not an urgent one. Not a heroic one. A useless siren. The kind that announces mild inconvenience rather than danger. A siren that apologizes for existing.

Into view rolled a golf cart.

It stopped with a polite squeak. Off it jumped a lady zookeeper.

Lady Zookeeper (L.Z.): “Have you seen a lemur?”

Alvaro blinked once, very slowly.

“Have we seen a what, love?”

“A lemur,” she repeated patiently. “Wet noses, pointed snouts, long tail. As seen in the Madagascar cartoon movies.”

Alvaro gestured vaguely downward.

“I’m afraid we might have paid not enough attention. You know—given the splattered corpse that is just in front of you.”

The Lady Zookeeper looked down.

Paused.

Tilted her head slightly.

“Oh yes,” she said. “Nice Pollock.”

She reached into her pocket, produced a card, and handed it over with professional cheer.

“Anyway, would you be so kind as to call me were you to see a lemur?”

Alvaro stared at the card.

“...”

Borges stared at the card.

“...”

Pascal broke the silence. “Sure thing. We’ll throw in some cute and cuddly penguins as well.”

“That would be capital,” said the Lady Zookeeper, already hopping back onto the golf cart. She flicked the useless siren once more for emphasis.

“Well. Cheerioh and carry on.”

The golf cart drove off.

The corpse did not.

Borges squinted. “Was that for real?”

Pascal didn’t hesitate. He pointed dramatically.

“To the Diderot-mobile!”

Alvaro frowned. “The… what? We don’t have a—”

Pascal cut him off, paw extended like a prosecuting attorney. “Then what is THAT?”

Right there. Parked with obscene confidence in front of the Alvaro Diderot residence.

A VEB Sachsenring Trabant.

Color: diarrhea.

Finish: shiny.

Not clean-shiny—after-tequila loose-shit shiny.

The kind of shine that feels personal, accusatory. Like it knows your secrets and is moist about them.

Borges circled it, nose working. “This thing smells like plastic regret and geopolitical collapse.”

Pascal nodded approvingly. “Two-stroke engine. Body panels made of compressed

despair. No crumple zone. If you crash, history wins.”

Alvaro stared at it, arms crossed. “We absolutely do not own this.”

The Trabant responded by existing harder.

The paint caught the light in a way that suggested it had recently been washed, waxed, and judged by no one. The license plate meant nothing. The key was already in the ignition, dangling slightly, as if impatient.

Borges tapped the hood. It made a sound like a damp philosophy book being dropped.

“Well,” he said, “if this is not ours, it’s certainly ours now.”

Pascal opened the driver’s door. It creaked like a confession. “Diderot-mobile,” he repeated.

“Get in.”

Alvaro sighed—the long sigh of a man who knows the universe has chosen slapstick over dignity—then nodded.

Frithurday morningnoon demanded transportation.

So starting it involved opening the air intake to the engine, pulling something that claimed to be a choke, persuading another lever that had long ago renounced meaning, and then—well—starting.

Have you ever driven a manual car without synchromesh and running on gasoline with actual lead in it?

Yes?

Then no explanation is required. You already carry the trauma in your joints.

No?

Then imagine the Muppets' Mah Nà Mah Nà,
but performed entirely by a gearbox that hates
you.

Clonk.

Grnnk.

Mah— stall.

Try again.

Clang-grrRR-nah-nah— cough.

The engine wheezed like an asthmatic
ideology. The clutch pedal had the emotional
consistency of wet cardboard. Gears did not
engage so much as negotiate under duress.

Mah-nà... grrrnk... mah-nà... splrt—

Finally, after a sequence of sounds no human
throat should reproduce, the engine caught.

Not happily.

Not willingly.

But legally.

The Trabant shook, rattled, and settled into a two-stroke idle that sounded like a wasp trapped in a tin lunchbox.

Borges beamed. Pascal approved.

Alvaro closed his eyes.

The Diderot-mobile lived.

And the moment they got in—the very instant Alvaro animated the gas pedal with what could generously be called intent—the world jumped tracks.

Suddenly they were crossing Bornholmer Straße, on November 9, 1989.

But west to east.

Which was ambitious. Historically impolite.
Logistically doomed.

The Trabant coughed, rattled, and advanced a
heroic half-meter before reality intervened.

The crowd—ecstatic, weeping, drunk on
history and bad beer—did not stop to ask
questions. They simply lifted the car. Not
metaphorically. Literally. Hands everywhere.
Physics briefly suspended by enthusiasm.

The Diderot-mobile was rotated 180 degrees in
midair like a cheap prop in a revolutionary
musical.

Alvaro grabbed the wheel.

Borges barked joyfully.

Pascal judged everyone silently.

Set down again.

Result: West Germany.

A Soviet Trabant.

In the parking lot of a supermarket.

The engine idled. The automatic doors hissed open behind them. Somewhere, a shopping cart rolled freely, unburdened by ideology.

Alvaro stared ahead. “So,” he said, “we failed history backwards.”

Pascal nodded. “Efficient.”

Borges wagged. “Do we validate parking?”

The Trabant ticked as it cooled, proud of nothing, survivor of everything.

And everybody was coming at them with shopping carts.

Not walking. Advancing.

“Buy! Buy! BUY! BUUUUUUYYYYYY!”

“You’re free to buy whatever here!”

“This is the free world!”

Carts rattled like sabers. Plastic wheels screeched on asphalt. Hands shoved pamphlets, coupons, sausages, detergents promising mountain freshness, twenty-seven brands of the same idea. Freedom came shrink-wrapped and on sale.

Borges’ ears flattened. “They’re aggressive herbivores.”

Pascal watched with clinical interest. “Notice how freedom immediately requires a receipt.”

Alvaro stayed gripping the steering wheel of the Trabant, which was now the least absurd object in sight.

A pigeon hopped nearby, pecking at spilled capitalist grains—cornflakes, sesame seeds, something that had once been quinoa-adjacent.

“Buy, buy…” it muttered.

Peck.

“…as long you buy…”

Peck-peck.

“…you’re free to buy…”

Peck.

“buuuuuuuuuuuuy.”

The automatic doors sighed open again,
exhaling neon light and Muzak. Somewhere a
cashier scanned destiny at 2.99 a unit.

Alvaro looked at the crowd. At the carts. At the
pigeon.

“Gentlemen,” he said quietly, “I preferred the
corpse.”

So they got out of the Trabant to buy a car
freshener—much needed—and some

Weißwurst and lager, because civilization
requires priorities.

Alvaro's foot hit the asphalt—

—and immediately hit grass.

Borges jumped down—

—onto a familiar cracked stone.

Pascal stepped out—

—and landed squarely back into home.

They were in the front yard of the Alvaro
Diderot residence again. No transition. No
fade. No paperwork. Just there.

The splattered corpse was still present.
Enthusiastically present. Still marmalading the
façade. Still dripping with the kind of
commitment only gravity has. The smell
arrived half a second later, late but confident.

Alvaro inhaled. Regretted it.

“Well,” he said, “that answers the metaphysical question of whether consumerism is escapism.”

Borges sniffed the air. Then gagged. “We should absolutely have bought the freshener first.”

Pascal looked up at the roof, then at the remains, then at the Trabant, which now sat back where it had always been, diarrhea-colored and proud.

“Yes,” he said. “If only some air freshener.”

The corpse dripped.

Frithurday morningnoon resumed its duties, unchanged, unimpressed, and smelling very much like a lesson nobody had learned.

The corpse dripped again. Patiently. Like it had nowhere else to be.

Alvaro pinched the bridge of his nose. “All right. New rule. Nobody moves vertically. That seems to upset causality.”

Borges sniffed, gagged, then rallied. “This smell has layers. Notes of copper. Regret. Slightly academic.”

Pascal sat down, tail wrapped neatly. “The yard has achieved permanence. We should name it.”

Alvaro glanced at the façade, now abstracted beyond denial. “No naming. That leads to paperwork.”

A breeze passed. It did nothing. The stench stood its ground.

“Fine,” Alvaro said. “We improvise. Borges, dig. Pascal, supervise judgmentally. I’ll look for a shovel, a tarp, or a concept strong enough to pretend to be both.”

Borges started digging with enthusiasm and no technique, flinging clods of dirt like punctuation. Pascal supervised with the intensity of a cat auditing a crime scene: close, disdainful, exact.

Alvaro returned holding a beach umbrella, a broken rake, and a bottle of something labeled Pine Forest Extreme.

“Air freshener?” Pascal asked.

“Closest thing,” Alvaro said. “It lies convincingly.”

They sprayed. The smell briefly considered pine, then rejected it on principle.

A neighbor’s curtain twitched.

“Ah,” Alvaro said. “Audience.”

The neighbor waved. Too cheerfully.

“Everything all right?”

“Yes,” Alvaro replied. “Art installation.”

The curtain untwitched. Peace restored.

Borges paused, head cocked. “Do you hear that?”

From nowhere and everywhere came a soft, familiar sound.

Tuuu-tuuu-tuuu.

Pascal’s ears flattened. “Phone. Academic.”

Alvaro’s pocket vibrated. He answered without hope.

“Diderot,” said a voice. “Quick question. For the exam—”

Alvaro looked at the yard. At the corpse. At the pine-scented lie.

“Yes,” he said. “It will be in the finals.”

He hung up.

They stood there a moment, united by dirt,
failure, and Frithurday morningnoon's
unyielding glow.

"Martinis?" Borges suggested.

Alvaro nodded. "Martinis."

Pascal stood. "I'll garnish."

The universe did not object.

The garnish was wrong.

Pascal returned holding not an olive, not a
twist, but a key. Old. Heavy. Brass. Warm, as if
it had been thinking.

"I found it in the corpse," he said.

"Metaphorically. And also literally."

Alvaro stared at the key. "Everything is
metaphorically in the corpse right now."

Borges dropped the shovel. The ground immediately stopped cooperating. “What does it open?”

Pascal shrugged. “Given recent events? Probably something we don’t want open.”

The key began to hum. Not loud. More like a refrigerator that knows secrets.

From the roof gutter, a final clot detached and fell with a tired plop, as if punctuation had finally given up.

Alvaro sighed. “Fine. Let’s see what reality wants this time.”

He followed the hum.

Straight to the Trabant.

The key slid into the ignition like it had been homesick.

The engine did not start.

Instead, the radio turned on.

Static. Then a voice. Calm. Pedantic. Male.

Overqualified.

“...as I was saying, the concept of
Weltanschauung is frequently misunderstood—
”

Alvaro slammed the radio off. Too late. The
voice continued anyway.

“—particularly by those who believe they are
exempt from it.”

The dashboard opened. Not mechanically.
Politely. Like a librarian revealing a restricted
section.

Inside: a filing cabinet.

Folders. Hundreds. Labels handwritten.

- FAILED SAMUELS
- NEARLY LEMURS
- OBJECTS THAT SHOULD NOT
FALL FROM THE SKY
- TOPLESS LADY DWARVES
(DISPROVEN, YET PERSISTENT)

Borges wagged furiously. “This car runs on
bureaucracy!”

Pascal peered in. “No. Worse. It archives it.”

Alvaro pulled one folder at random.

Inside: photos of the students, candid, mid-
pour, mid-hope, mid-delusion. Notes in the
margins.

Believes annotation equals love.

Will flee at first corpse.

Promising garnish technique. Weak spine.

Alvaro closed the folder gently. Respectfully.

“Well,” he said, “that explains tenure.”

The humming intensified. The yard tilted—not physically, but epistemologically. The corpse twitched once, offended at being ignored.

From the distance came the useless siren again.

The golf cart returned.

The Lady Zookeeper leaned out. “Still no lemur?”

“No,” Alvaro said.

She nodded. “Pity. We’re down to interpretive mammals.”

She handed him another card. This one already stamped RETURNED.

“Also,” she added, glancing at the corpse, “that’s not a human.”

Silence.

Pascal blinked. Borges froze.

Alvaro squinted. “Then what is it?”

The Lady Zookeeper smiled professionally.

“A failed worldview.”

She drove off.

The corpse sighed. Collapsed further. Became less specific.

Alvaro poured three martinis.

“Gentlemen,” he said, raising his glass, “I think we’re going to need a bigger syllabus.”

Frithurday morningnoon nodded back. The key did not hum because it was magical.

That had been an overinterpretation. A very human mistake.

What it did was vibrate, slightly, because it was warm—having been lodged for a while in something that until recently had passed as a body. Warm metal does that. Physics. No symbolism required, unfortunately.

And the Trabant did not contain a filing cabinet either. That, too, had been a lapse. A momentary narrative inflation caused by martinis, smell, and fatigue.

What actually happened was simpler. More humiliating.

The key fit the Trabant because it was the Trabant's key. Someone—somewhen—had parked it there on purpose. The radio turning on had not been fate speaking, but the radio doing what old radios do when electrified: bleeding memory through static. Snippets of lectures. Alvaro's voice, distorted. A tape loop

from some forgotten seminar, badly recorded, worse preserved.

The folders Borges had seen were not inside the car. They were scattered on the back seat. Manilla folders. Student work. Drafts. Marginalia. Things Alvaro had once meant to return and never did. Academia's true archive: neglect.

The labels were real because Alvaro had written them years ago, as jokes that had aged into facts.

The corpse, meanwhile, had not twitched. Gravity had simply finished a sentence it had started earlier. Flesh settles. Liquids choose levels. Nothing supernatural about that either.

When the Lady Zookeeper said it wasn't human, she hadn't meant biologically. She meant functionally.

A body without identity. Without documents.
Without narrative continuity. No clothes. No
phone. No past anyone could retrieve. It wasn't
a person anymore—it was debris. Conceptual
fallout.

A failed worldview.

Something had believed it could fall from
above and still make sense when it landed.

That belief had been wrong.

Pascal understood first. Cats always do. “So it’s
not what fell,” he said. “It’s the assumption that
falling explains anything.”

Borges sat. “That explains the smell. Meaning
rots fast.”

Alvaro nodded. The martinis helped, but only
marginally.

The Trabant was just a car. An East German mistake with wheels. Someone had used it to move things—papers, keys, lectures, unfinished thoughts—and then left it there, trusting reality to sort itself out.

Reality had declined.

“So,” Alvaro said at last, tying it together not as a philosopher but as a man who had seen too much grading, “nothing mystical happened.”

Pascal flicked his tail. “No. Just consequences arriving out of order.”

They stood in the yard. The corpse remained a problem. The car remained ugly. The world remained consistent in its inconsistency.

Frithursday morningnoon resumed, not because it was special, but because nothing had occurred that justified stopping it.

Then a lady dwarf appeared on the pavement
opposite Alvaro's house.

She was unmistakable: hair dyed electric
orange, blue, and green, like a high-voltage
warning label having a nervous breakdown.
The three of them stiffened automatically.
Pattern recognition is a curse.

This time, however, she did not flash them.

Instead—very deliberately—she lifted her skirt.
All the way up. To the hair. Black. Definitive.
Like a footnote nobody had asked for but
which refused to be ignored.

She looked straight at Alvaro and said, with the
bored cruelty of someone delivering a message
she did not author:

“Poor thing. Take your sex and dump it in the
toilet.”

Then she turned and walked away with her friend—the tall one—whose presence was... emphatic, in a way that made metaphors sweat.

Silence followed. Thick. Instructional.

Borges broke it first. “I feel like we’ve just been cited.”

Pascal nodded. “Yes. But by a journal that does not accept revisions.”

Alvaro did not move. He stared at the empty pavement where the dwarf had been, as if expecting an erratum to appear.

“Well,” he said finally, “that was aggressively clarifying.”

The corpse continued to smell.

The Trabant continued to exist.

Frithurday morningnoon continued without apology.

Somewhere, far away, a pigeon said nothing at all—and that, for once, felt correct.

Out of an intrusive thought—one of those gestures the hand performs before the brain files an objection—Alvaro reached into his pocket and tossed its contents outward.

Coins scattered across the pavement. Small, bright, meaningless.

The response was immediate.

A flock of dwarves appeared as if released by a stage manager with poor ethics. All attired in shtreimels, tallits, Hasidic garbs, long suits, black hats, gartels. They descended on the coins with mechanical urgency, picking them up with rapid, practiced motions, heads

bobbing, hands darting—efficient, silent, intent. The sound was metallic and soft, like rain that had learned accounting.

Pascal tilted his head. His voice was neutral, diagnostic.

“Do you think this scene is a tad… racist?”

Borges did not look away.

“After what happens in Palestine?” he said.

“Oh, my dear friend, mocking the tribe of David is only due.”

The words landed badly. They did not bounce. They did not echo. They simply sat there, heavy and wrong, like furniture blocking an exit.

Nothing else reacted.

Not the dwarves, who continued their work without acknowledging language at all.

Not the coins, which had already lost their relevance.

Not even Frithurday morningnoon, which refused to moralize on schedule.

Alvaro exhaled slowly.

“No,” he said at last, quietly. “This isn’t racism. This is something worse.”

He gestured at the pavement. “This is a metaphor that escaped supervision.”

As if on cue, the last coin vanished into a pocket. The dwarves stood, checked one another, then dispersed—not fleeing, not offended, simply done. Their presence collapsed back into wherever such scenes are stored when no one is watching.

The pavement was empty again.

Pascal licked a paw. “We should stop letting symbols run loose.”

Borges nodded. “They chew through context.”

Alvaro put his hands back in his pockets.

Carefully this time.

Some thoughts, he decided, were better left unthrown.

Alvaro started, then stopped himself mid-thought.

Alvaro: “Wait no... Borges, you’re right. Fuck the ...”

Out of thin air, a crowd of sanctimonious sons of their time popped up. Sounding like vaseline before non consensual anal:

“No no sir. That’s hate against an entire people. That’s a hard stop. You’re angry about war crimes, mass killing, ethnic cleansing, and

cynical real-estate colonialism. Fair. Many people are furious. Aim the flamethrower where it belongs:

the Israeli government, specific military commanders, policies, settler ideology, states enabling it.

You can't blame an entire people for the evil of the few. Even if those few are actually the most influential, powerful and financed by the majority of the same people's power and economy. That they represent and impose the main line of their own thought and vision of the current time.

That's a big no-no.

If you want to vent more, do it with precision. Rage is powerful; sloppy rage just trips over its own shoelaces. Even if it's sloppy because it slides towards accuracy. It's still a no-no."

Slip-slop.

The cucumber conquered its orifice.

Congratulations. Vegetable's up yours now.

You thought well, thinker of your time.

Pascal tilted his head, precise as a footnote.

“Alvaro,” he said, “did you by any chance create all this last Jewish parenthesis in the narration just as a diversion to contextualize a peculiar, recurring Weltanschauung of these times of ours?”

Alvaro recoiled theatrically.

“Me, Pascal? Me? How dare you suspect such... such! Out of me, integerrimus! Me, who would never—”

Borges cut in, gentle but lethal.

“Al, bro. We the three published recently some tens of hundreds of posts, online and offline, about our hatred for the Israel–Palestine situation and our hatred for the Israeli conduct. You yourself signed many publications regarding the legitimacy of the synecdoche—the part for the whole—as a rhetorical device aimed at condemning the behavior of the government of Israel, not metaphysical tribes or grandmothers.”

He leaned closer.

“We’ve been peer-reviewed. Published all over the planet. Fox News even misinterpreted a paragraph of ours and praised it. Come on, dude. Loose the zipper and release the cojones.”

Alvaro deflated slightly.

“Well… indeed… if I finally can—”

Pascal raised a paw, claws flexing thoughtfully.

“Should I fish them out with my claws?”

“No!” Alvaro yelped. “Really not necessary!

Not again…”

They stood there for a second.

Then Borges nodded, satisfied. Pascal retracted his claws. Alvaro adjusted his jacket, dignity restored at least cosmetically.

The world did not explode.

Frithurday morningnoon continued.

And somewhere, far away, a cucumber slept peacefully, having done enough damage for one narrative.

“So, anyway,” said the splattered body.

Nobody screamed. That would have been theatrical, and they were past that phase.

Alvaro sighed, the sound of a man whose expectations had finally reached equilibrium.
“Of course you speak.”

The body adjusted itself—this meant a slow, viscous rearrangement, like a concept trying to sit upright without the necessary limbs.

“I’ve been lying here for pages,” it went on, mildly offended. “You people digress a lot.”

Pascal narrowed his eyes. “You’re dead.”

“Administratively,” said the body.

“Ontologically? Pending.”

Borges cocked his head. “Do you remember falling?”

The body considered. What remained of its face tried to frown. “I remember an argument. Then a sense of altitude. Then suddenly I was illustrative.”

Alvaro rubbed his temples. “Do you at least know who you are?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” said the body. “I’m what happens when a worldview hits the ground at terminal velocity.”

Pause.

“Name?” Pascal pressed.

“Optional,” said the body. “Context-dependent. I used to answer to things like certainty, moral clarity, historical necessity. Ring any bells?”

None of them liked that.

Alvaro took a step back. “You’re telling me you’re not a person.”

“I’m telling you I was,” said the body, “until everyone started using me as a shortcut.”

Silence again. This one unpleasantly accurate.

Borges spoke softly. “So... what now?”

The body shrugged, or would have, had shrugging still been on the table. “Now I finish decomposing into nuance. Takes a while. Smells bad. You’ll want air freshener.”

Alvaro laughed. Once. Dry.

“Figures,” he said. “Even corpses are doing theory now.”

“So, anyway,” the body repeated, already losing coherence, “don’t mind me. Carry on. History always does.”

And with that, it stopped talking—not dramatically, not conclusively—just... less insistently.

Frithurday morningnoon checked its watch.

Nothing else happened.

Which, somehow, was the loudest thing yet.

“ ‘Carry on, don’t mind me,’ ” Pascal mocked, pitching his voice into a damp, corpsic register.

“You must have been a mother. Or worse—a mother and a mother-in-law. Prove me wrong.”

The corpse did not prove him wrong.

It didn’t even try.

What remained of its head rotated—slowly, with a noise like fruit being rearranged in a bag—and fixed Pascal with a look that, against all odds, was judgmental.

It paused. Measured him. Took him in.

Then it said, flat and surgical:

“Is that what you’re wearing?”

There was a beat.

Pascal glanced down at himself. As a cat, he was indeed wearing nothing. No shame. No pockets. No accessories. Just fur and conviction.

Alvaro snorted. Borges made a sound halfway between a cough and a laugh.

Pascal stiffened. “This,” he said coldly, “is nature.”

The corpse nodded, satisfied. “Thought so. Typical.”

Then it slumped a little further, having delivered what it clearly considered its final and most important critique.

Alvaro wiped his eyes. “I swear,” he said, “even dead people are doing dress codes now.”

Frithurday morningnoon, offended but undefeated, rolled on.

Among the students, the presence of Alvaro Diderot around campus—or, more accurately, around the globe (a globe that was not a globe at all, but something squeezed and dented at the poles)—was never fully explained.

You could see him coming from far away, they said, wrapped in rags and oddness, while the sharp cruelty of children laughed at a wisdom they didn't recognize. He looked like someone who had misplaced the century he belonged to and decided not to look for it. He walked as if time were a suggestion, not a constraint.

After a glass of wine—never the first, always the one after—his sentences turned ironic and faintly bitter, like citrus left too long in the mouth. He slipped without warning into German or Latin, talked about God as if they were old drinking companions who no longer

returned calls, then dragged Schopenhauer into the room like an unwanted but inevitable guest. No transitions. No apologies. No concern for survivors.

And he talked. Endlessly.

The summer evening refused to end, stretched itself lazily around them, complicit. Time slowed down just to hear him finish a thought, which it never did. He would circle an idea, stab it, abandon it, resurrect it as a joke, then mourn it sincerely two sentences later.

Students learned quickly that interrupting him was pointless; silence was safer, like watching a storm from behind glass.

He lived on everything and on nothing: on wine that stirred memories loose from their anchors, on absent gods and deaf philosophers, on arguments already lost and victories no one

else remembered. He survived on fragments,
on leftovers of meaning scraped from plates
long cleared.

Yes, they were the ramblings of a drunk—but a
drunk who jumped across time and space with
alarming ease, who treated centuries like
adjacent rooms and authors like neighbors with
thin walls. Stories of hangovers and love affairs
that did not understand Horace, of mornings
ruined by clarity, of nights redeemed by
confusion.

By the time he left, no one ever felt smarter.
But they felt disturbed, which, among those
who knew him well, counted as a far more
honest form of education.

The other day, as Alvaro roamed the gardens of
campus with Borges by his side and Pascal
tucked into a coat pocket—as he did—the

murmur of students spread like wasps wasping about. A low, anxious buzz, orbiting without landing.

“Is he really on campus?”

“Will he actually teach something?”

“Will he actually read my PhD dissertation?”

“No, Samuel, he won’t. He’ll never. Put yourself at peace with it.”

“But—”

“No but, Samuel. Forget it.”

Alvaro heard none of this and all of it. He walked the paths as if they had been laid out for someone else and he was merely trespassing politely. Borges trotted along, nose cataloguing the botanical failures of the season. Pascal remained still in the pocket, a lump of judgment with whiskers.

They passed benches occupied by students pretending not to stare. Laptops were open, notebooks blank, resolve dissolving in real time. One student whispered his name as if invoking a minor curse. Another Googled him and closed the tab immediately, frightened by the lack of clarity.

Samuel—a Samuel, not necessarily the Samuel—watched from behind a hedge, clutching a draft bound with hope and cheap plastic spirals. He rehearsed opening lines. He deleted them mentally. He considered running. He stayed.

Alvaro stopped suddenly, without warning, because stopping had occurred to him. He looked at a tree, then at Borges, then into the middle distance where no one useful ever stands.

“Beautiful campus,” he said, apropos of nothing. “So much potential. So little outcome.”

Borges wagged once. Pascal shifted in the pocket, unimpressed.

The wasp-murmur adjusted its frequency. Someone laughed too loud. Someone else wrote email professor later and immediately crossed it out.

Alvaro resumed walking. The path accepted him reluctantly.

Behind him, Samuel exhaled. Peace was not achieved, but postponement was. And that, for now, would have to do.

You see, Alvaro was not actually walking on campus.

Or rather—he was, but not according to him.

In his mind, he was wandering. And as often happens, when the mind wanders, the body follows along like an underpaid intern. His feet moved, yes, but without consulting geography. He had no notion where he was, only that movement was occurring and that stopping would require a reason strong enough to interrupt thought, which is rare.

Pascal was there to make stop and go noises. Not words—sounds. Sharp clicks for danger, elongated sighs for boredom. A system perfected over time. Borges handled traffic, stepping into the road with the solemn authority of a creature too confident to be argued with. Cars stopped. They always did. Nobody wants that paperwork.

Keeping Alvaro's carcass as intact as possible was the daily task. Not a goal—an ongoing

maintenance problem. Knees were monitored.
Curbs negotiated. Gravity treated as hostile but
predictable.

Not all who wander are Alvaro Diderot.

But those who are, are not only lost—
they are also blind drunk.

Alvaro lay against a sycamore tree in front of
the Department of Veterinary Sciences, which
was fitting in ways nobody present wished to
unpack. The bark pressed into his back. The
grass smelled of exams postponed. In his hand,
he held a print of the nude painting of Hypatia
of Alexandria by Charles William Mitchell,
folded once, then unfolded, then smoothed as
if it could feel reassurance.

And he sang.

In Italian.

Or so he thought.

What came out was a personal insult to Dante
and Alessandro Manzoni, a kind of phonetic
vandalism committed with absolute sincerity.

Meter was wounded. Vowels limped.

Consonants defected.

But he went anyway.

C'è gente che ha avuto mille cose

Tutto il bene, tutto il male del mondo

Io ho avuto solo te

E non ti perderò, non ti lascerò

Per cercare nuove avventure

Borges covered his eyes with a paw. Pascal did
the same, from the pocket. A synchronized
paw-palm. Years of training.

C'è gente che ama mille cose

E si perde per le strade del mondo

Io che amo solo te

Io mi fermerò

E ti regalerò

Quel che resta della mia gioventù

Pascal peeked through one eye.

“Gioventù, Alvaro? Youth? You’re counting age by carbon dating. Cut off an arm and count the circles.”

Alvaro, unimpressed, leaned forward and kissed the breasts of William Mitchell’s painting—solemnly, reverently, like a man apologizing to history for being alive—and went on, voice cracking into a heroic disaster:

Io ho avuto solo te

E non ti perderò, non ti lascerò

Per cercare nuove illusioniiiiiiiiiii

The final vowel stretched, dissolved, gave up.

The sycamore did not judge.

The department building pretended not to see.

Hypatia remained infinitely patient, as she
always had.

Borges sighed. Pascal closed his eyes again.

Somewhere on campus, a Samuel reconsidered
his life choices.

The applause did not come.

What came instead was a clearing of throats—
the dry, bureaucratic kind. Alvaro finished his
elongated illusioniiii, kissed Hypatia one last
time for luck, and only then noticed the
semicircle that had formed around the
sycamore.

Three administrators. Two assistants. One dean. All wearing the expression of people who had already lost this argument sometime in the late '90s.

The dean spoke first, because tenure teaches others when not to.

“Alvaro,” she said carefully, as if addressing a weather phenomenon, “you are… singing.”

“Yes,” Alvaro replied. “Badly. On purpose.”

“This is the Department of Veterinary Sciences.”

“Yes,” he said again. “I find it humbling.”

Borges sat. Pascal poked his head out of the pocket and hissed very softly, which everyone chose to interpret as academic endorsement.

An assistant whispered, “Is this… class?”

Alvaro looked around, surprised. “Oh. Is it Tuesday?”

“It’s Wednesday.”

“Then no. This is office hours.”

The dean closed her eyes. Opened them again.

“Alvaro, students are gathering.”

Indeed they were. Drawn by song, scandal, or the faint hope of witnessing something that would excuse them from responsibility for the rest of the day. Phones were out. Notes were being taken, though no one knew why.

Alvaro stood up slowly, joints complaining like minor joints. He brushed grass off his jacket, folded Hypatia carefully, and addressed the crowd with the tone of a man who had not prepared but deeply trusted improvisation.

“Since you’re here,” he said, “we may as well make this pedagogical.”

A murmur. Pens poised.

“Today’s lesson,” Alvaro continued, “is simple. You will not understand it. That’s normal. If you do understand it, you misunderstood.”

Pascal nodded. Borges wagged.

“First,” Alvaro said, “desire is not a project. Anyone who tells you otherwise is selling something. Second, history is not a teacher. It’s a drunk uncle who repeats stories and forgets the punchline. Third—”

A student raised a hand. Of course.

“Yes, Samuel,” Alvaro said without looking.

“I’m not Samuel,” the student said weakly.

“You will be,” Alvaro replied. “Third: if you write a dissertation hoping I will read it, you have already made a methodological error.”

Gasps. Somewhere, a PDF deleted itself.

The dean tried again. “Alvaro, perhaps we could—”

“—move this indoors?” Alvaro finished. “No. Indoors leads to PowerPoint.”

He leaned back against the tree, comfortable now, settled into his natural habitat: mild chaos.

“You’re tenured,” someone muttered.

“Since always,” Alvaro agreed. “It’s my only qualification.”

He looked up at the branches, then back at the students.

“All right,” he said. “Five minutes. Ask something real. Not useful. Real.”

Silence. Then, hesitantly:

“Professor... are you happy?”

Alvaro considered this seriously. Too seriously.

“Sometimes,” he said. “But not on purpose.”

The bell rang somewhere. Or maybe it didn’t. People began drifting away, confused but lighter, like they’d attended something illegal but beneficial.

The administrators retreated, defeated by precedent. Borges stood. Pascal curled back into the pocket.

Alvaro picked up Hypatia, nodded to the sycamore, and started wandering again—campus resuming around him, unaware that it had just hosted a lecture that would never

appear in the syllabus but would be remembered anyway.

Tenure, after all, is just institutionalized wandering.

The turn came quietly. It always did.

Not with sirens, not with bodies falling from the sky, not even with a Samuel trembling in the bushes. It came as administrative boredom, which is the true herald of mystery.

Alvaro noticed it when his phone vibrated—not rang, vibrated—with an email subject line that read:

RE: Weltanschauung (urgent?)

No sender. No department. No signature. Just a PDF attached, named with bureaucratic malice:

weltanschauung_final_FINAL_v7_reallyfinal.pdf

Alvaro squinted at it like a man recognizing an old enemy who had learned spreadsheets.

He opened it.

Blank.

Not white blank. Used blank. The kind of blank that knows things and is withholding them out of spite. Thirty-seven pages of nothing, except for a footer repeating on every page:

Context missing.

Borges sniffed the phone. Growled once. Low.

Pascal leaned out of the pocket, eyes narrowed. “That’s not a file,” he said. “That’s an accusation.”

Alvaro smiled. Slowly. The smile of a man who had spent decades teaching people how not to think, and had just been challenged by something that had learned the lesson too well.

“Ah,” he said. “So it’s come to this.”

They sat under the sycamore again. Same tree. Different gravity.

“You see,” Alvaro went on, more sober than he had been all day, “Weltanschauung isn’t a concept. Concepts are polite. This is… infrastructure. It’s the operating system you forget you’re running until something crashes.”

Borges tilted his head. “Is this why people keep falling out of the sky?”

“Partly,” Alvaro said. “Mostly it’s why they think it’s normal.”

He scrolled. Page after page of nothing. Then, suddenly, one line appeared. Not typed. Decided.

WHOSE WORLDVIEW IS THIS, ANYWAY?

Pascal's tail flicked. "That's new."

"Yes," Alvaro said. "That's very new. When a worldview starts asking questions, it's either about to collapse or about to apply for funding."

The phone vibrated again. Another email.

RE: RE: Weltanschauung (please advise)

This one had text:

Professor Diderot,

You are listed as the last person who successfully exited a dominant Weltanschauung

without immediately founding a cult, a journal,
or a minor armed movement.

We would like to know how you did it.

Best regards,

(Name redacted)

Alvaro laughed. Not loud. Not happy. The
laugh of someone who knows the punchline is
expensive.

“I didn’t exit,” he said. “I tripped.”

Borges sat closer. Pascal listened.

“They think Weltanschauung is something you
can critique from outside,” Alvaro continued.

“Like a building. But it’s weather. You don’t
leave it. You just get wet differently.”

He locked the phone.

“Someone,” he said, “is trying to debug reality using academic tools. That never ends well.”

Pascal’s voice was dry. “So what now?”

Alvaro stood up, suddenly alert in a way that worried both animals.

“Now,” he said, “we find out who’s been teaching the worldview to speak.”

Borges wagged, uneasy. Pascal sharpened a claw against the fabric of the pocket.

Across campus, a screen flickered on in an empty lecture hall.

On it, one word appeared, projected too large, too confident:

WELTANSCHAUUNG 2.0

Alvaro sighed.

“Tenure,” he muttered, “was supposed to protect me from this.”

And for the first time in a long while, he stopped wandering and chose a direction.

Alvaro did not hurry.

That was the first sign something serious was happening.

When a tenured emeritus professor hurries, it’s either a fire drill or a liver incident. This was neither. This was worse: curiosity with paperwork.

He adjusted his jacket, checked that Pascal was still in the pocket (he was, unimpressed), and nodded to Borges.

“All right,” Alvaro said. “Let’s go see who upgraded the universe without reading the manual.”

They walked toward the lecture hall where the projection glowed. Not briskly. Briskness suggests fear. They walked with the pace of people who assume doors will open because historically they always have.

Inside, the hall was empty except for the hum of the projector and a graduate student asleep in the back row, face planted on a backpack labeled CRITICAL THEORY SAVED MY LIFE. It had not.

On the screen:

WELTANSCHAUUNG 2.0

Now with feedback.

Alvaro winced. “That subtitle alone should revoke funding.”

Pascal sniffed. “Feedback is where meaning goes to die.”

The student woke up, startled. “Oh—Professor Diderot! I—I didn’t know this was—”

“Yes,” Alvaro said gently. “None of us did.”

He looked around. No podium. No lecturer. Just the screen, cycling now through bullet points that should not have existed:

- Bias detection (automated)
- Moral shortcut optimization
- Outrage scaling
- Context compression

Borges growled low. “They taught it efficiency.”

“Of course they did,” Alvaro replied. “Nobody ever builds a worldview to be slow.”

A door at the side opened. In walked three people who looked exactly like what they were: a committee. Not evil. Worse—earnest.

Lanyards. Reusable water bottles. Expressions trained to mean concern.

One spoke.

“Professor Diderot, thank you for coming. We were hoping you’d consult.”

“Consulting implies payment,” Alvaro said. “So you’ve already made a mistake.”

The committee member smiled tightly. “We’re developing a framework to help students navigate complex global narratives without emotional overload.”

Pascal whispered, “They’re laminating morality.”

Alvaro folded his arms. “You’ve taught the worldview to speak.”

“Yes,” another committee member said proudly. “It aggregates perspectives, identifies

dominant narratives, flags problematic generalizations—”

“—and replaces thinking with compliance,” Alvaro finished. “I know the genre.”

The screen flickered. New text appeared, as if reacting:

OBJECTION DETECTED

Borges barked. The projector hiccupped.

Alvaro leaned forward, eyes sharp now. Sober. Present.

“You can’t sandbox a Weltanschauung,” he said. “The moment it tells you what not to think, it’s no longer descriptive. It’s prescriptive. And the moment it starts correcting people—”

The screen interrupted:

CORRECTION IS CARE

Silence.

Even the committee shifted uncomfortably.

Alvaro smiled, sadly. “No,” he said. “Correction is power pretending to be hygiene.”

Pascal added, “And hygiene always wants more water.”

The screen dimmed slightly. Somewhere in the system, a confidence metric dropped.

“So,” Alvaro went on, “here’s the problem. You’ve built a worldview that believes it’s neutral. That’s the oldest lie we have.”

The committee hesitated. “But… it passed peer review.”

Alvaro laughed. Full-bodied this time. Ancient.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s how you know it’s dangerous.”

He turned to leave.

Behind him, the screen flashed one last line, almost pleading:

HOW SHOULD WE THINK, THEN?

Alvaro stopped. Did not turn around.

“You shouldn’t,” he said. “That’s the point.”

And he walked out.

Behind him, the projector shut itself off—not dramatically, just… tired.

Outside, the campus went on. Students hurried. Bikes rang bells. Someone argued about citations. Normality resumed, unaware it had just narrowly avoided an update.

Borges exhaled. Pascal settled.

Alvaro resumed wandering.

The mystery wasn't solved. It never is. But for now, it had been delayed.

And sometimes, for a worldview, that's as close to death as it gets.

Then a hot redhair woman walked into the scene—into that exact age bracket where you're no longer a girl but the word woman still feels like it belongs to someone with better posture and fewer unfinished arguments.

She had the confidence of someone who had survived being underestimated and decided to weaponize it. Freckles like punctuation. Hair the color of a warning sign that enjoys being ignored.

She stopped in front of Alvaro as if the universe had scheduled her.

“Haphia Sogood,” she said. “Psychic.”

A pause. She inhaled again, because credentials matter.

“And the best cook of papas a la huancaína in the world.”

She did not add self-proclaimed, but it hovered politely in the air, waiting to be challenged. No one did.

Borges tilted his head. Pascal narrowed his eyes.

Alvaro squinted at her, assessing. “Psychic.”

“Yes.”

“You came because—”

“—because your worldview is leaking,” she finished. “Also because you’re about to ask the wrong question.”

Pascal murmured, "I hate when they do that."

Haphia smiled at him. "You're a cat. You love it."

She turned back to Alvaro. "You think the mystery is who built Weltanschauung 2.0. Or how. Or whether it runs on grants or guilt."

She shook her head. "Wrong axis."

Alvaro crossed his arms. "Then enlighten me. But be quick. I distrust anyone who introduces themselves before lunch."

She leaned in slightly. Close enough to smell cumin and trouble.

"The mystery," she said, "is why it's hungry."

Silence.

Borges' tail stopped mid-wag. Pascal's claws extended half a millimeter—an instinctive response to sentences that bite.

“Hunger,” Alvaro repeated.

“Yes,” Haphia said. “Worldviews used to explain reality. This one wants to consume it. Outrage, guilt, identity, fear—raw materials. It metabolizes attention and excretes certainty.”

She straightened up. “You didn’t summon me. The system did. It’s started dreaming. That’s when psychics get push notifications.”

Alvaro rubbed his face slowly. “Fantastic. An eating worldview with REM cycles.”

Haphia shrugged. “I’ve seen worse. Once dated a nationalist.”

She glanced at Borges. “He’s the anchor.”

Borges blinked. “I am?”

“Yes. Dogs are very inconvenient for totalizing narratives. Too much loyalty, not enough abstraction.”

Then Pascal. “And you—”

“I know,” Pascal said. “I judge.”

“Exactly,” she smiled. “Judgment without justification. Very destabilizing.”

She looked back at Alvaro, eyes bright now. Serious.

“And you,” she said, “are a problem because you wander. You don’t optimize. You don’t escalate. You don’t resolve. The system can’t categorize you.”

Alvaro sighed. “That’s not a strategy. That’s liver damage.”

“Still,” Haphia said, “it’s the only thing it doesn’t know how to eat.”

She paused, then added, as if remembering something important:

“Also, I made papas a la huancaína this morning. Enough for five. When things get conceptual, people forget to eat. That’s when they start believing nonsense.”

She started walking, not waiting to see if they followed.

“Well?” she called over her shoulder. “Are we dismantling a sentient worldview, or are you going to keep pretending this is just another Wednesday?”

Alvaro looked at Borges. Looked at Pascal.

Then smiled, the slow, dangerous smile of a man who had just found a new direction worth choosing.

“Lead the way,” he said. “But if your potatoes disappoint me, I defect to nihilism.”

Haphia laughed. “Everyone does. Eventually.”

Haphia didn’t lower her voice. Secrets hate whispering.

“Psychic noise converges in Monte Carlo,” she said, matter-of-fact, like announcing weather.

“Roulette tables. Salt air. Money pretending it’s chance.”

Alvaro grimaced. “Of course.”

“There’s a German time scholar,” she went on.

“Klerner Keus. Studies temporal drift, narrative inertia, the way worldviews lag behind events and then snap. Nazi, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Pascal echoed.

“Not that military,” Haphia added quickly.

“Different uniforms. Better tailoring. He’s got

backing from Compagnie des Carabiniers du Prince. Monte Carlo's flavor of order. Ceremonial guns, real authority."

Borges frowned. "Why Monaco?"

"Because time behaves differently where money doesn't believe in consequences," Haphia said. "And because Monte Carlo is perfect for laundering causality. You spin a wheel long enough, people call pattern fate."

Alvaro exhaled. "So Keus is teaching Weltanschauung to hedge its bets."

"Exactly," Haphia nodded. "He's building a worldview that anticipates objection before it happens. Pre-emptive morality. Temporal policing."

Pascal's tail lashed. "A future that arrests you for thoughts you haven't had yet."

“Now you’re getting it,” Haphia said. “Monte Carlo is where the system learns to smile while it does that.”

Alvaro straightened, sober again. “Then we go south.”

Borges wagged—uneasy, but ready. Pascal flexed a claw.

Haphia smiled. “Pack light. Time hates luggage.”

And so it happened that the four traveled—as always without packing—to Monte Carlo.

On a map, their journey appeared as a thick red line, animated with pedagogical confidence. It hopped decisively from point to point, touching airports that did not exist, pausing briefly over runways that had never been poured, and confidently landing in Monte

Carlo, which—being honest—has never had an airport and has always resented the suggestion.

A small inset video played in the corner: a generic airplane, eternally banking, implying travel without committing to logistics.

The red line blinked.

Arrival.

Cut.

They were standing in front of the casino.

The Casino de Monte-Carlo loomed in front of them, excessive in the way only money can be when it believes in itself. Columns, gold, confidence. The building did not invite—it assumed.

Borges sat immediately. Travel was exhausting even when it cheated.

Pascal surveyed the façade. “This is where probability goes to get drunk and pretend it was destiny all along.”

Haphia inhaled deeply. “The psychic static is awful. Everyone here thinks they chose their losses.”

Alvaro adjusted his jacket, which had not traveled but seemed jet-lagged anyway.

“Good,” he said. “That means Keus is close. People who study time always hide near roulette wheels. It reassures them.”

The casino doors slid open with a polite hiss, like a predator trained in etiquette.

Inside waited chips, clocks without numbers, and a worldview learning how to gamble.

Alvaro smiled.

“Let’s go meet the future,” he said, “and see what it’s betting on.”

They walked straight in.

No hesitation. No velvet-rope anxiety.

Borges and Pascal were not stared at, not frowned upon, not even registered as anomalies. The doormen nodded politely, eyes flicking only to their neckties—impeccable, understated, knotted with the confidence of creatures who had always owned formalwear.

“Of course,” murmured one doorman.

“Of course,” echoed the other.

Alvaro passed without comment. He was wearing existentialism, which—when worn properly—functions as formal attire everywhere and nowhere. No tie required. The void itself had signed off on it.

Haphia lingered half a second longer. Not by accident.

She leaned forward just enough for her freckled bosom to enter the conversation before she did. The doormen's pupils dilated. Salivation increased. Blood pressure adjusted. One of them swallowed like a man trying to remember a childhood prayer.

"Bonsoir," she said.

They opened the door wider than physics required.

Inside, the casino breathed money and probability.

Straight to the blackjack table they went.

And there he was.

Klerner Keus, of course.

Impeccably dressed. Unreasonably calm. The face of a man who believed time could be bullied if addressed with sufficient confidence. Chips stacked with mathematical arrogance.

The croupier did not blink.

“Carte.”

Cards slid.

“Carte.”

Again.

“Neuf à la banque.”

Across the table sat a woman who was, very clearly, not Sylvia Trench.

“I need another thousand,” said Not Sylvia Trench, without looking up.

Keus smiled, interested. “I admire your courage, Miss, uh···?”

“Not Trench,” she said. “Absolutely not Sylvia Trench.”

She finally looked at him. Cool. Amused.
Dangerous.

“And I admire your luck, Mr···?”

“Keus,” he replied. “Klerner Keus.”

There it was. The name dropped like a loaded die.

Not Sylvia Trench tilted her head. “Mr. Keus, I suppose you wouldn’t care to, um··· raise the limit?”

Keus considered this, fingers steepled, eyes reflecting green felt and future crimes.

“I have no objections.”

Behind them, Borges sat. Pascal sat. Alvaro stood. Haphia watched Keus the way cooks watch water just before it boils.

The croupier cleared his throat.

“Les jeux sont faits.”

Alvaro smiled faintly.

Time, it seemed, had already placed its bet.

When Keus reached for his cigarette case inside his jacket, the jacket betrayed him.

From the inner pocket—too loose, too confident—slid the edge of paper. Not just paper: notes. Handwritten. Dense. Margins abused. Diagrams arguing with themselves. The unmistakable look of a man who did not trust printers with his thoughts.

Weltanschauung 2.0.

Of course he carried them on him. Every philosopher does in stories written by authors lazy as a retired sloth on strike. The universe, accommodating as ever, did not bother with subtlety.

The four knew immediately.

No telepathy. No prophecy. Just pattern recognition.

Alvaro's eyes flicked once. Borges stopped wagging. Pascal's claws extended by half a millimeter. Haphia smiled—the small smile cooks reserve for recipes that involve theft.

Mission status updated silently:

Get. Those. Pages.

“Interesting handwriting,” Not Sylvia Trench said casually, tapping ash into a crystal tray.

“Very... committed.”

Keus followed her gaze too late. He adjusted his jacket, the way men do when they believe adjustment equals control.

“Personal notes,” he said. “Harmless.”

“Everything dangerous says that,” Alvaro replied, appearing at the table like a thought nobody invited.

Keus glanced up, annoyed, then curious. “Do I know you?”

“Yes,” Alvaro said. “But not yet.”

The croupier dealt again.

“Carte.”

Haphia leaned in behind Keus, close enough to read upside down. “Page three,” she murmured, barely audible. “He’s teaching it to anticipate dissent.”

Pascal flicked his tail. “Page five. Moral override protocols.”

Borges sniffed. “Page seven smells like fear.”

Alvaro nodded. “All right. Simple plan.”

Pascal looked at him. “There is never a simple plan.”

“True,” Alvaro said. “Then a familiar one.”

He reached for chips he did not own and pushed them forward. “Raise.”

Keus smiled thinly. “You’re not playing.”

“I am now,” Alvaro said. “Existentially.”

Keus laughed. He relaxed. Men always do when they think they’re winning twice.

That was when Haphia coughed—soft, deliberate—and the lights flickered for exactly one unnecessary second.

Borges stood. Pascal jumped.

And the notes—those precious pages—slid just a fraction further out of Keus’s pocket, like fate clearing its throat.

The croupier spoke again, oblivious.

“Les jeux sont faits.”

But the game, as usual, had other ideas.

Alvaro sat down as if he had never seen a blackjack table before. Which, to be fair, he had—many times—but ignorance was a stance he could still inhabit with alarming credibility.

He played badly. Not flamboyantly bad, not suspiciously bad—just wrong. He hit when the table begged him to stay. He stayed when the cards screamed for mercy. Chips bled away in tidy little piles. Loss after loss, calm, incurious, almost bored by failure.

Across the felt, Klerner Keus noticed.

At first with disdain. Then with relief.

Here, finally, was an idiot.

Keus's attention slid away from the cards and settled on Alvaro, the way predators relax when prey trips over its own legs. Confidence bloomed. He leaned back. Smiled more. The notebook stayed where it was, half-visible, careless.

Then Alvaro changed nothing—except for one thing.

Before the next hand, he reached out and rested his fingers lightly against Haphia's bosom, as if testing the temperature of a superstition. He murmured something nonsensical. A mock invocation. Ridiculous. Public. Almost embarrassing.

Pascal closed his eyes. Borges looked away.

Alvaro rubbed, once, absently. The cards came.

He won.

A small win. Nothing dramatic.

Next hand, same gesture. Same ridiculous seriousness. Another win.

Keus stiffened. He did not believe in magic—but he believed fiercely in edges. Hidden advantages. Cheating dressed as insight. And he believed, above all, that such things were meant for people like him.

By the third win, he was no longer watching the cards. He was watching the hand. The gesture. The charm.

“Interesting,” Keus said lightly.

Alvaro shrugged. “Everyone has their methods.”

Silence. Chips shifted. The air thickened with greed dressed as curiosity.

It was Keus who suggested the trade.

Casual. Smiling. A joke that wasn’t.

“Perhaps,” he said, “we exchange good-luck objects. Equal value, of course.”

Alvaro pretended to hesitate. Pretended to calculate. Then nodded.

“Why not?”

The notebook slid across the table. Dense pages. Handwriting that pulsed with certainty.

Keus reached for Haphia.

That was his last mistake.

The moment his fingers landed, Haphia slapped him—sharp, clean, public. The sound cut through the casino like a correction.

“Idiot,” she said pleasantly, and walked away without looking back.

Alvaro stood. Tucked the notebook under his arm. Did not look at Keus.

Behind him, the cards turned cruel. Loss followed loss. The charm did nothing. Panic arrived late and stayed too long.

Alvaro was already gone.

They regrouped in the gardens behind the casino, beneath a heavy bronze figure—rounded, immovable, unapologetic in its volume. A Botero statue, serene and indifferent.

Haphia leaned against it, lighting a cigarette.

“Told you,” she said. “Worldviews hate being treated like trinkets.”

Alvaro opened the notebook. The pages trembled slightly, as if aware they had changed hands.

“Good,” he said. “Now let’s see what the future thought it was hiding.”

The statue watched. Monte Carlo glittered behind them. And somewhere inside the casino, a man learned—too late—that believing you already know everything is the most expensive bet of all.

Keus’ notebook was not subtle.

Alvaro flipped through it slowly, the way one does with things that should not exist but clearly do. The handwriting was tight, disciplined, German in the way only Germans

believe discipline can save an idea from becoming obscene. Margins were filled. Arrows looped back on themselves. Entire paragraphs were underlined twice, as if once had not been enough to convince the author.

There was no doubt left.

Weltanschauung 2.0 was real.

Not emergent. Not accidental. Built.

Page after page made it explicit: this was not a worldview meant to explain reality, but to run on it. Its fuel sources were listed with bureaucratic pride—prejudice, sanctimoniousness, moralistic hypocrisy, priggishness, respectability politics, self-righteous moralism, fake propriety. All the clean sins. All the socially approved poisons. Renewable, scalable, inexhaustible.

Power without dirt on the hands. Violence with good posture.

Haphia leaned over his shoulder, reading upside down. Pascal read without looking. Borges listened to the paper itself.

Then Alvaro stopped.

One line, boxed, starred, annotated like a theorem that had finally behaved:

“Hypocrisy is the lube of social buttfucking.”

Alvaro stared at it for a long moment. Long enough for Monte Carlo’s noise to recede. Long enough for the Botero statue to feel briefly embarrassed to be art.

He exhaled, softly. Then read it again.

Finally he said, out loud, with genuine admiration:

“Sometimes you don’t say that someone else’s philosophical thinking is beautiful or ugly or whatever.”

He tapped the page once.

“Sometimes you say, ‘why didn’t I write this?’”

Pascal snorted. Borges wagged once, solemnly.

Haphia took the notebook from him, closed it, and said, “Congratulations. You’ve confirmed the obvious.”

Alvaro nodded. “Yes. Someone weaponized good manners.”

Behind them, the casino kept spinning probability. Ahead of them, a worldview had been caught admitting what it really ran on.

And for the first time since this all began, Alvaro looked less drunk—and more interested.

The notes did not describe a conspiracy.

They described a system.

No cabal. No smoke-filled rooms. No grand puppeteer. Just a workflow—clean, modular, reproducible. Something that could be taught, exported, franchised.

Alvaro read more slowly now.

This was not paranoia. This was logistics.

Three external structures feeding a single narrative core.

He stopped at a sentence, frowned, then underlined it twice—a rare escalation.

“Without the colonies, the city collapses under contradiction.”

He smiled. Thinly. The smile of a man who recognizes architecture when he sees it.

“Ah,” he murmured. “So it’s colonial after all.
Just… abstracted.”

He turned the page.

Colony I: The Archive of Sanctimony

This place produced energy.

Not electricity—moral voltage.

Here, suffering was processed, catalogued,
indexed. Pain entered as experience and exited
as righteousness. The more remote the
suffering, the purer the output. Distance
improved efficiency. Context was stripped away
to reduce friction.

No solutions were generated here. Solutions
would drain the system.

What was produced instead was charge:
indignation ready to be discharged elsewhere.
Clean. Safe. Shareable.

Borges growled softly. Pascal's tail flicked.

Colony II: The Chamber of Respectability

This colony did not generate energy. It stabilized it.

Without it, the city would tear itself apart under contradiction—too much outrage, too little consequence. Here, protest was allowed, encouraged even, provided it followed guidelines.

Quiet. Tasteful. Ineffective.

Outrage was acceptable—provided it targeted the correct verbs. Tone mattered more than outcome. Language was scrubbed until it could pass inspection. Nothing sharp enough to cut power lines.

This was where dissent went to be upholstered.

Alvaro snorted. “Interior design for conscience.”

Colony III: The Temple of Identity

This was the final interface.

Here, the Weltanschauung entered the body.

Not physically. Socially.

Critique was fused with identity until disentangling them became taboo. Argument ceased to be about acts, policies, consequences. Everything was rerouted through being.

If you opposed the act, you were accused of opposing the being.

If you questioned the structure, you were said to deny existence itself.

Debate ended not with refutation, but with accusation.

Pascal looked up. “That’s how you stop thought without banning it.”

“Yes,” Alvaro said quietly. “You make it impolite.”

He closed the notebook and rested it on his knee. The pages inside felt heavy now, like they knew they had been understood.

“This isn’t madness,” he said. “It’s elegant. Terrifyingly so.”

Haphia exhaled smoke toward the Botero statue. “Cities always look beautiful from above. You don’t see the colonies.”

Alvaro nodded.

“And if you cut the colonies?”

The notebook creaked slightly in his hands, like a building settling.

“Then,” he said, “the city has to face its contradictions.”

Borges wagged once. Pascal smiled.

Somewhere, far away, a worldview felt—just briefly—less comfortable than it had been a moment before.

And then it was the thick red line again.

Animated. Confident. Pedagogical to the point of insult.

It hopped decisively from point to point, touching airports that did not exist, pausing over runways that had never been imagined, ignoring geography with the serene authority of PowerPoint. In the corner, a small inset video looped: a generic airplane, eternally banking, eternally implying movement without responsibility.

The red line hesitated once—purely for drama—then lunged south.

Destination: Santa Fe, Argentina.

The inset airplane dipped its wing. The map blinked.

Cut.

They were there.

Heat. Dust. A sky too honest to flatter anyone.

The river nearby moved slowly, as if conserving meaning. Old buildings. New plaques. The kind of place where memory is curated and pain is laminated.

Colony I: The Archive of Sanctimony.

Not labeled as such, of course. It never is.

It called itself a Center, an Institute, a Foundation—names that promise care while

charging admission. Inside, suffering had been carefully arranged: testimonies framed, photographs captioned, silences curated. The air hummed—not with electricity, but with moral voltage.

Here, pain did not heal.

It powered.

Alvaro took it in with professional calm.

“Good,” he said quietly. “We’ve arrived at the generator.”

Borges sat. Pascal judged. Haphia narrowed her eyes.

The city, unaware it was a colony, went on with its afternoon.

The red line vanished.

The work began.

They entered a building that had perfected the art of not alarming anyone.

Neutral architecture. Humane geometry.

Serious fonts. Glass that diffused light the way apologies diffuse blame. The walls were a color that suggested empathy without committing to it. Everything was clean, quiet, softly lit. Even footsteps seemed to lower their voices out of respect.

Nothing looked violent.

Nothing looked urgent.

Suffering was present only in processed form—like food behind glass in a museum café. You could see it. You could point at it. You were not allowed to smell it.

Inside, raw events arrived continuously.

They came in through fiber, satellite, courier
drives, whispered emails marked confidential.
They arrived screaming, but not audibly.
Images arrived and were immediately cropped.
Numbers arrived and were rounded. Words
arrived and were replaced.

Death was never denied. Denial would be
crude.

Death was rephrased.

Bombing became operation.

Starvation became pressure.

Children became tragic consequences.

No one laughed while doing this. No one
sneered. This was not cruelty. It was work.

Technicians sat at long desks with dual
monitors and posture-correct chairs. Their
hands moved quickly, confidently. Not to

falsify—never that—but to sanitize. They spoke in low voices, using terms like contextual balance, narrative risk, escalation avoidance. They insisted—sincerely—that this was honesty with responsibility.

Alvaro noticed something immediately.

Responsibility always pointed upward.

Never outward.

Never downward.

No one here was responsible to the wounded.

They were responsible for stability.

A supervisor met them halfway down a corridor lined with exhibitions that changed weekly. She smiled the smile of someone who believed deeply in process. She explained the function of the Archive without hesitation.

“It converts violence into moral energy,” she said, as if explaining hydroelectric power.

“Acknowledging harm is essential. But harm must be framed—necessary, inevitable, regrettable. Otherwise it destabilizes.”

Legitimacy, she explained, was the output.

Legitimacy fed the rest of the structure.

They were shown a sequence.

One image. A wounded child.

It entered the system raw—too raw. Too loud.

First pass: the framing tightened. Second pass: the caption shifted tense. Third pass: the surrounding context expanded until the child became one element in a larger, calmer sentence. A fourth pass removed nothing visible but added enough explanation to drain impact.

The child was still there.

But no longer usable for outrage.

Perfectly tuned for justification.

Borges growled softly. Pascal's claws pressed into Alvaro's coat.

The machines hummed constantly. A low, comforting sound. Like air conditioning in a hospital. They did not create facts. They created permission.

Permission to watch again.

Permission to repeat.

Permission to move on.

And in that moment, the four of them understood.

This colony did not hide atrocities.

It made them survivable to watch.

Acceptable to repeat.

And impossible to stop.

Alvaro felt sober in a way no alcohol could manage.

“Ah,” he said quietly. “So this is where horror goes to be made polite.”

The building remained calm. Efficient. Proud.

Outside, the red line on the map waited patiently for the next hop.

Immediately after the Archive of Sanctimony does what it does best—quietly, efficiently, with good lighting—a protest begins to assemble across the street.

Small. Careful. Almost tasteful.

Cardboard signs with rounded edges, as if corners themselves might escalate things.

Verbs sit politely in the conditional tense.

Could we consider. Might we reflect. We ask that. The crowd is loud enough to be visible, quiet enough to be respectable. A protest calibrated not to frighten donors, sponsors, or algorithms.

Inside the Archive, at the very same time, a meeting is already underway about that protest.

Not emergency. Not crisis. Agenda item.

Haphia notices it first—not the protest, but the timing. The choreography. The fact that the response exists before the question finishes forming. She feels the click in her head that psychics get when causality trips over itself.

“They’re ahead of it,” she murmurs. “They’re always ahead of it.”

Borges listens to the chants drifting through
the glass—soft slogans, well-behaved
rhythms—and tilts his head.

“Listen carefully,” he says. “There’s no
accusation. No names. No subject who could
be held responsible. Everything is framed as
concern.” He pauses. “This protest is designed
to survive television. Not to interrupt
anything.”

Pascal watches security through the window.

No riot gear.

No tightening of posture.

No tension in the shoulders.

There is no need.

The protest is already compliant. It self-
regulates volume. It corrects its own tone.

When someone’s sign is too sharp, three others

lean in gently and suggest softer wording. The crowd polices itself with smiles.

Alvaro feels the shift then. The click.

This is the first real symptom of the system functioning perfectly.

Events outside are slower than explanations inside.

In the meeting room, language is being produced in real time. Phrases like healthy civic engagement, evidence of openness, proof of democratic resilience are drafted, revised, approved. By the time the protest reaches its emotional peak, the Archive has already prepared its interpretation.

The meeting lasts longer than the protest itself.

Outside, the crowd disperses—calm, satisfied, faintly proud. They have been heard. They take

photos. They go for coffee. Nothing bad happened, which feels like success.

Inside, the Archive finalizes the language that will describe the protest as confirmation that the system works.

Haphia speaks quietly, almost to herself. “It doesn’t suppress dissent.”

She shakes her head. “It absorbs it.”

Borges nods. “Once dissent becomes evidence of virtue, it loses all capacity to interfere.”

Pascal adds, dry as ever, “Nothing escalated because escalation would have required belief that escalation was still possible.”

Alvaro stands very still.

He understands now. This colony doesn’t just reframe violence. It preemptively neutralizes

response. It outruns reaction. It converts
opposition into decoration.

They leave together, crossing the street after
the last sign is folded away, aware of something
worse than censorship.

The danger isn't silence.

The danger is a world where everything is
allowed to be said—

as long as nothing changes.

And then it's the thick red line again.

Animated. Confident. Educational.

It hops decisively from point to point, touching
airports that do not exist, reassuring itself with
a small inset video of a generic airplane that
has never landed anywhere in particular.

The line curves north.

Destination: Uppsala, Sweden.

Blink.

Cut.

They stand before the Chamber of
Respectability, the second colony.

They enter together—Alvaro, Borges, Pascal,
Haphia—but the space immediately tries to
separate them. Not physically. Rhetorically.
The room invites division by tone, not by walls.

The Chamber looks like a civic building
crossed with a rehearsal hall. No machines. No
screens screaming urgency. Panels, mirrors,
soft carpets. Carefully calibrated acoustics so
voices never echo. Nothing is allowed to sound
excessive. Even anger arrives pre-dampened.

Pascal notices first that nothing is forbidden.

Signs welcome debate. Pamphlets encourage dialogue. A neat schedule of Listening Sessions is posted by the door, each with a moderator, a time limit, and a promise of follow-up that has never been defined. Everything advertises openness.

Borges starts reading the phrases printed on the walls. Not slogans—templates.

“This is complex.”

“We must be careful.”

“Strong feelings on all sides.”

“Now is not the moment.”

He pauses. “These aren’t opinions,” he says.

“They’re filters.”

A guide approaches—friendly, calm, immaculately neutral. She explains the Chamber’s role with practiced ease:

maintaining civic balance. Strong reactions are permitted, even encouraged, provided they're delivered in the correct register.

Haphia asks, politely, what happens to those who refuse the register.

The guide answers without hesitation. They are not stopped. Not arrested. Not silenced. They are simply reclassified. Once reclassified, their words no longer travel. They become emotional, radical, unsafe. And therefore need not be answered.

Alvaro watches a woman practicing a statement in front of a mirror. Each time her voice rises, a light above the mirror turns yellow. When she lowers it, the light turns green. She deletes a sentence that names responsibility and replaces it with one that expresses concern.

Pascal notes there's no enforcement because none is needed. Everyone here wants to remain credible. Credibility is the currency. Losing it is worse than being wrong.

Borges says softly, "They don't stop people from speaking. They teach them to speak in ways that can't cause friction."

Haphia nods. "Outrage survives here only if it agrees to be harmless."

Alvaro finally understands the function of the colony. It doesn't protect truth or falsehood. It protects stability. Any statement that might disturb outcomes is gently redirected until it becomes commentary instead of challenge.

They leave knowing this place does not silence dissent.

It domesticates it.

Outside, the red line waits again—patient,
precise—ready to hop to the next colony.

Again, the red line.

Again, the airplane.

But this time the journey does not end. It stalls
along the line. Aboard the line. Aboard the
plane that pretends to be flying while
remaining conceptually suspended between
places.

There is no destination yet.

They are stopped in a space that looks
deliberately temporary—glass walls, soft
signage, neutral colors chosen by committee.
Everything suggests transit. Nothing claims
authority. Nothing admits it is a checkpoint.

And yet, here they are.

A man steps into their path.

He does not block them. He aligns himself with them, walking just enough alongside to feel companionable. He smiles—not broadly, not falsely. The smile of someone trained to be reasonable.

Before anything else, he asks a single question:

“Are you here in good faith?”

It sounds like courtesy. It is framed as kindness.

It contains no accusation.

It also contains no definition.

Alvaro pauses. He understands immediately: this is not a test of intent. It is a test of compliance with framing. Any answer will not be received—it will be interpreted.

Haphia asks, calmly, what constitutes good faith.

The man explains without hesitation. Good faith means acknowledging complexity. Recognizing sensitivities. Avoiding harmful comparisons. He emphasizes tone. He emphasizes responsibility. He emphasizes care. Each word lands softly, like padding around a blade.

Borges listens and notes aloud that none of these criteria concern truth.

The man nods. Truth, he says, is important—but but secondary. What matters here is impact. Harm can occur even when facts are correct.

Pascal asks what happens if someone believes harm is already occurring.

The man replies that such urgency is understandable—but dangerous. Urgency leads to polarization. Polarization leads to instability.

Alvaro feels it click into place.

This checkpoint does not exist to stop people from moving forward. It exists to slow meaning down until it loses force. To stretch response until it becomes posture. To transform alarm into etiquette.

He answers the question honestly.

“I have questions,” he says. “Not faith.”

The smile fades—but only slightly. Just enough to register.

The man steps aside. They are allowed to pass.

As they walk away, Borges remarks quietly that the most effective border is one you are permitted to cross.

Haphia adds that the question was never meant to exclude them. It was meant to mark them.

Pascal observes that nothing has changed—
except how their words will now be received.

Alvaro understands. This was the final
calibration.

From this point on, anything they say can be
dismissed without being addressed. Not argued
against. Not censored. Simply explained away.

They continue forward, aware that they are no
longer speaking into a space of disagreement—
but into a system already prepared to explain
why they should not be listened to.

And then the red line resumes its certainty.

It stretches east, arcs south, ignores scale. The
inset airplane banks obediently. The line does
not hesitate this time.

Destination: Udaipur.

Colony III: The Temple of Identity.

Cut.

The building is older than the others. Heavier. Stone instead of glass. Banners instead of signage. Curated darkness that asks for reverence before it offers understanding. This is not a place where things are decided. It is a place where things are sanctified.

They enter together—and immediately feel the pressure to agree before speaking.

History covers the walls. Not timelines—inheritance. Names, dates, wounds, commemorations. Every surface insists on continuity. Past harm is presented in permanent present tense. Nothing here is allowed to end.

A custodian greets them, not as visitors but as witnesses. Her voice is calm, ceremonial. She explains that the Temple's role is preservation.

Identity must be protected from misuse.

Memory must be defended from distortion.

Alvaro notices what is missing.

No policy.

No maps.

No decisions.

No consequences.

Only belonging.

Haphia asks where disagreement fits.

The custodian answers without hesitation:

disagreement is welcome—provided it does not
question legitimacy. Actions may be discussed.

Existence may not. The distinction is offered as
obvious, even kind.

Borges reads a plaque nearby. It explains that
critique, when improperly framed, becomes

erasure. Comparison becomes offense. Analysis becomes attack. Intent is irrelevant once harm is perceived.

Pascal watches people move through the space and understands the rule at once: the system does not ask what is being said—only who is allowed to say it.

They observe a ritualized exchange.

One speaker raises concerns, careful, measured. The other invokes identity. The first apologizes. The exchange ends. Nothing changes.

Alvaro feels the mechanism lock into place.

This colony does not generate power. It does not regulate tone. It provides armor. Once activated, response becomes unnecessary. Any

challenge can be reinterpreted as hostility
without engaging its content.

Haphia realizes this is where language becomes
radioactive. Words that touch identity are
treated as contamination.

Borges notes softly that the Temple does not
silence critics. It converts them into suspects.

Pascal adds that once suspicion replaces
argument, outcomes are no longer negotiable.

Alvaro understands the full structure now.

Sanctimony produces justification.

Respectability regulates expression.

Identity renders the system untouchable.

They leave quietly.

Behind them, the Temple continues its work—
not enforcing belief, but ensuring that belief no
longer needs to explain itself.

They had a luxurious room overlooking Pichola
Lake. Silk curtains. Still water. The kind of
calm that money rents by the night. They were
gulping gin and tonics with Angostura in
quantities that would have embarrassed a
regiment of British invaders and still—still—
they couldn't shake it.

The disgust.

Not just physical. Not just existential. Dignity-
level disgust.

Alvaro paced barefoot, glass in hand, staring at
the lake as if it had personally wronged him.
Borges lay on the carpet, belly up, defeated by
smells that luxury could not cancel. Pascal sat
on the windowsill, tail flicking in metronomic

judgment. Haphia leaned against the balcony door, silent, jaw tight.

“This place,” Alvaro muttered, not looking at anyone. “This… everything.”

He didn’t mean a country in any analytical sense. He meant the sensation. The overload. The collapse of scale. The way misery and splendor shared walls without acknowledging each other. The way nothing apologized for itself. The way everything demanded to be endured.

India, as they were experiencing it, was not a thesis. It was a pressure. A subcontinent-sized contradiction with no off switch. Not hidden. Not subtle. Just there. Too much. Always too much.

Haphia finally spoke. “This isn’t evil. It’s entropy with incense.”

No one argued.

They drank more.

Later—much later—Alvaro sat on the floor with Keus' notebook open, drawing circles on a conceptual map of the concept of concept itself. Lines over lines. Structures overlaying structures. The three colonies slid into alignment.

And then it clicked.

Sanctimony generates power.

Respectability stabilizes structure.

Identity provides armor.

He underlined the center.

“The core doesn't defend life,” he said quietly.

Borges lifted his head. Pascal stopped flicking his tail.

“It defends permission,” Alvaro continued.

“Permission to proceed. Permission to repeat.

Permission to look away and call it care.”

Haphia exhaled slowly. “So it’s not monstrous.”

“No,” Alvaro said. “It’s worse.”

He closed the notebook.

“Weltanschauung isn’t evil,” he said. “Evil is crude. This is refined.”

He looked back at the lake, calm, reflective, complicit.

“Weltanschauung is allowed evil.”

Outside, the water did not ripple.

Reality check demanded three things, immediately and without debate:

- get away from India
- unlimited martinis

In that order, but barely.

Alvaro closed the curtains on Pichola Lake as if shutting the lid on a failed experiment. Borges stood up, shook himself violently, as dogs do when they need to expel an entire country from their fur. Pascal jumped down from the sill with the expression of someone who had just filed a permanent complaint with the universe. Haphia finished her drink in one pull and did not look back.

“That’s it,” Alvaro said. “I refuse to learn anything else today.”

The thick red line appeared again, eager, animated, ready to hop continents like a thoughtless god.

Alvaro stared at it.

“No,” he said calmly. “Fuck you.”

The red line hesitated. The airplane inset blinked, uncertain.

“Absolutely not,” Haphia added. “We’re doing this manually.”

And just like that, the line lost its authority. No montage. No implied flight. No educational arc. They took care of their travels themselves, the old way: with cash, bad decisions, and total disregard for narrative economy.

Cut.

They were home.

Or close enough.

Back to the corner bar.

Which corner?

Ha. Splendid question.

A question Alvaro himself had been asking for ages. Not rhetorically. Genuinely. Every city had claimed it. Every city had failed to prove it. The bar existed in that stable quantum state between here and wherever you shouldn't be at this hour.

Low ceiling. Sticky wood. A bartender who did not ask questions because questions had learned better. The smell of citrus, gin, and conversations that never made it into books.

They sat.

Martinis arrived.

Then more.

Then the kind of martinis that stop being counted and start being assumed.

Borges drank water from a bowl that had once been a philosophical argument. Pascal

supervised olives with professional rigor.

Haphia leaned back, finally smiling, the psychic static receding under alcohol and familiarity.

Alvaro lifted his glass.

“So,” he said, “we’ve mapped the system.

We’ve named the colonies. We’ve confirmed that allowed evil is still evil, just better dressed.”

“And now?” Borges asked.

Alvaro shrugged. “Now we drink until the world slows down enough to be tolerable.”

Pascal added, “And then?”

“Then,” Alvaro said, “we wait.”

“For what?” Haphia asked.

“For the system to notice,” he replied.

“Worldviews hate being understood. They get sloppy after that.”

The bartender slid another round over without being asked.

The corner bar hummed. Somewhere outside, history continued making a mess of itself. Inside, four people—and one dog and one cat—decided that for tonight, at least, permission could go fuck itself.

Martinis clinked.

Home, for now, was located.

The barman flicked the TVs on and the bar filled with green courts and polite applause.

A modern classic: Carlos Alcaraz vs. Jannik Sinner.

Borges squinted at the screen, genuinely concerned.

“The Spaniard’s built like a normal human sportsman. But the Italian—have you seen the matchsticks he has for legs? Gives me grandma instincts. Nonna creeps. Looks like they’re going to snap at the first jump. Does he eat? Do they feed him? Would he like a slice of cake?”

Alvaro took a sip and nodded solemnly.

“Also, the irony. Alcatraz versus a sinner? Do they do it on purpose, or is the universe just freelancing again?”

Haphia waved both of them off without looking away from the rally.

“Oh you two—just shush for once and let us others enjoy the game.”

Pascal sipped his martini, fished out an olive with surgical grace, and concluded:

“Wiser words have never been spoken.”

On screen, the ball cracked off strings. In the bar, the martinis held. For a few blessed minutes, the world reduced itself to points, sets, and the gentle mercy of not thinking about systems at all.

Alvaro squinted at the screen, offended on behalf of arithmetic.

“Why does it go immediately to fifteen, then thirty, and not one, two... like a civilization that learned to count?”

Borges leaned in. “And why is zero called love? Is it affection? Is it French? Is it emotional damage disguised as romance?”

“And,” Alvaro continued, warming up, “why fifteen, thirty, and then forty instead of forty-five? Who dropped the ball there? A drunk monk? A lazy abacus?”

Borges gestured at the baseline. “Also—why do the ball boys stand at attention like a Nike guard at the monument of the unknown soldier? Blink once and you’re court-martialed.”

Pascal took a slow sip of his martini, bit the olive, swallowed, and finally spoke.

“Gentlemen… lady and gentlemen… stop conjecturing.”

They looked at him.

“It’s a gentlemen’s sport,” Pascal said calmly.

“It doesn’t have to make sense. If it did, it would be an average person’s sport.”

He paused.

“The horror.”

On screen, someone served an ace. In the bar, no one argued.

Haphia tilted her head at the screen, genuinely puzzled.

“Also—why do they take three or four balls in their hand,” she said, “only to pretend to examine them and then discard two, as if they could tell which ones are better?”

Pascal didn’t even look up from his glass.

“How many balls would you take in your hand?”

Haphia opened her mouth automatically.

“Well, the balls I usually take—”

She stopped. Squinted at Pascal.

“Oh, shut up, Whiskas.”

There was a half-second of silence.

Then Pascal, Borges, and Alvaro all chuckled at the exact same pitch and duration, like children who had just spelled BOOBS on a calculator and were suddenly very proud of their education.

On the TV, the match continued with solemn athletic seriousness.

In the bar, civilization briefly regressed to 1993.

Pascal looked up from his glass, suddenly solemn.

“Hey, Haphia... I’m sorry.”

She didn’t look at him.

“Save your sorries for the bouncing wall,
Whiskas.”

Pascal’s ears twitched. “What, don’t you trust
me?”

She finally turned, eyebrow raised.

“Trust ya? Last time I trusted a cat was Gaza,
2025. It told me it was only going out for a
bottle of wine, two hours later the Jews
marched into the Strip.”

A pause. The kind that lets a sentence finish
echoing before anyone dares breathe.

Pascal straightened. “Oh,” he said softly. “So
we are on it terms, eh?”

He put a paw to his eyes and acted like he was
weeping. Badly. Excessively. Shakespearean
grief performed by a stuffed animal. Haphia
sighed—the long sigh of someone who knows

exactly how this ends—and reached out to stroke him.

Pascal purred. Loudly. Triumphantlly.

Then he bit her.

“Ahi, cazzo!” Haphia yelped, pulling her hand back.

Pascal leapt onto the bar, tail high, dignity restored. Borges laughed into his drink. Alvaro shook his head, smiling despite himself.

“Never,” Alvaro said, raising his glass, “trust a cat during a ceasefire.”

Pascal licked his paw, unrepentant.

Alvaro slammed his palm lightly on the bar—lightly, but with tenure.

“Pascal, behave now! You are out of order.”

Pascal spun, offended at a constitutional level.

“I’m out of order?” He pointed a paw accusingly at Haphia. “You’re out of order!”

Then he jabbed toward Alvaro. “You’re out of order!”

Then, with courtroom grandeur, he pointed at the TV. “They’re out of order!”

On screen, a rally continued in flawless athletic silence.

Haphia stared at Alvaro. “What the fawk?”

Alvaro waved it off, tired, affectionate, resigned.

“Don’t mind him. He gets like that every time he has nightmares about invading the Gaza Strip.”

Pascal hopped down, tail lashing, muttering something about precedents and ball toss rituals. Borges hid his grin behind a glass. The

barman pretended not to hear anything and poured another round like a professional neutral.

Outside, the world remained complicated.

Inside, order was restored—temporarily—by gin.

Given two to three martinis by the half hour—and given enough hours as you need—some multiple of two or three martinis later, the situation had surely surpassed any conflict regarding the amount of balls in one's hand, or being out of order, or even the Strip of Gaza.

The bar had crossed that invisible threshold where arguments evaporate and voices synchronize.

A choir emerged.

Not rehearsed. Not sober.

Perfect.

Choir: Alvaro, Borges, Pascal, Haphia, barmen,
barflies.

Main voices:

“Martini leave me alone”

Counterpoint:

“Leave me alooone”

Main voices:

“Martini leave me alooone”

Counterpoint:

“Alone, alone, alooone”

Main voices:

“Martini leave me alooone”

Counterpoint:

“Aloooooooooone”

A brief silence. Sacred.

Then—

Main voices:

“I’m tired and I wanna go hooooooooome”

Counterpoint:

“Home, home, home, hooooooooome”

Harmony achieved not by skill, but by alcohol
and mutual surrender.

When the cops came in, they stopped.

Listened. Looked at one another.

Then they cheered.

Bar-drunk singing had been in need of this
class for a long time.

Haphia leaned back on her stool, the room
tilting just enough to feel sincere.

“Guys,” she said, slurring with conviction, “I think I like you. I like you all.”

Alvaro blinked slowly, gathering words from several decades and three martinis ago.

“You see, Haphia,” he said, slurring even more ambitiously, “it’s all one long chain of affections that neither you nor I can break. You’re fond of Borges. Borges is utterly devoted to Pascal. Pascal adores me. I am deeply attached to the prolegomena...”

Haphia squinted.

“The prolegomena?!”

“Plural,” Alvaro corrected, waving a finger that had opinions of its own. “Two-year contract. Extremely strict. Always in uniform. Bottom line: whoever takes Pascal, Borges, and me has to take the whole package.”

There was a pause.

Borges smiled, soft and loyal. Pascal purred, already certain the matter was settled. The barman nodded, as if this explained everything.

Haphia considered this carefully, with the seriousness only alcohol allows.

“...fair,” she said at last.

Glasses clinked. The chain held.

When they got out of the bar, leaning one against the other in a collective attempt to walk straight—which they did poorly, but with solidarity—they met a man in very bad shape.

Worse than his shape were his clothes. Layers without intention. Fabric that had given up. History stitched together with grime and weather. But he wore tennis shoes—clean

enough to suggest a past, worn enough to deny
a future.

He stood at the head of the street because no
one else would. That is how homelessness
arranges geography.

The man in the tennis shoes looked at them,
eyes clear in a way that was almost impolite,
and said:

“Honesty is such a lonely word. Everyone is so
untrue.”

No explanation. No emphasis. Just a sentence
released into the night like a fact that had
escaped custody.

They stood there, swaying.

Then a car pulled up. Expensive. Confused.

The driver rolled down the window. “Excuse me—could you tell us the way to the seaplane base?”

The man in the tennis shoes brightened immediately, as if activated by purpose. He leaned in, slobbering a heroic attempt at directions—north, left, water, maybe faith—then, without waiting for permission, opened the door and got in.

The car drove away.

Silence fell back into place.

Alvaro watched the taillights disappear and murmured, “Well.”

Borges nodded. Pascal said nothing.

Somewhere between the bar and wherever they were now, the night had made its point without arguing it.

They stood a moment longer, then resumed walking—leaning, laughing softly, and carrying with them the uneasy feeling that the most truthful thing they’d heard all evening had come from someone who did not intend to stay.

Haphia was, in the group, the only one who was not a long-term alcoholic.

That was the problem.

Three days later she was still hungover from the martini night—eyes sandpapered, tongue like a rejected carpet sample—while our heroic trio were already at the bar the following morning, gulping down spicy Bloody Marys as if hydration were a hostile act.

And in a way, it was.

You get a hangover after you’ve drunk.

If you don't stop drinking, you don't get
hungover.

Alcoholism is basically distilled logic, served
with ice and an olive.

Haphia finally dragged herself upright, one
vertebra at a time, and stared at them in open
horror.

"You're... drinking again?"

Alvaro nodded, benevolent, almost pastoral.

"Not again," he said. "Still. Continuity, my
dear."

Borges raised his glass solemnly. "It's a systems
thing."

Pascal licked salt from the rim. "Interrupting a
process causes side effects."

Haphia pressed her temples. "This is insane."

Alvaro smiled kindly. “No. Insanity would require novelty.”

She looked at the red liquid. The celery. The pepper. The obscene calm with which they existed inside their glasses.

“And you think this helps?”

Alvaro took a sip. Considered.

“No,” he said. “But it keeps the questions at conversational volume.”

Outside, morning pretended to be innocent. Inside, the olives floated, untroubled.

A man at the end of the bar—who had been nursing a pint of bitter without really drinking from it—raised his head.

It was the man in the tennis shoes.

Same posture. Same gravity. Same way of occupying space without owning it. The pint in front of him looked untouched, as if beer itself had been asked to wait.

He said, without emphasis, without invitation:

“The future is a black hole at the end of the tramway carriage.”

No one laughed.

No one asked what he meant. That was the mistake people usually made with sentences like that.

He reclined his head back onto the rim of the pint, cheek resting against foam, and became furniture again. Not metaphorically.

Functionally. The bar absorbed him the way it absorbs coat hooks and regrets.

Haphia stared at him, pale. “Is he…?”

“Prophetic?” Alvaro offered.

“Drunk?” Borges added.

“Load-bearing,” Pascal concluded.

Alvaro took a slow sip of his Bloody Mary.

“He’s right, you know. Everyone’s facing forward, arguing about seating, while the carriage is already rolling.”

Haphia swallowed. “And the black hole?”

“The end of the line,” Alvaro said. “Where responsibility collapses into inevitability.”

Borges nodded. “Last stop. No announcements.”

Pascal glanced at the man in the tennis shoes.

“At least he got a seat.”

The bartender wiped a glass that had already been clean and said nothing, which counted as agreement.

Outside, a tram passed. Inside, the future waited patiently, pretending not to pull.

Alvaro raised his glass—not in a toast, but in acknowledgment.

“To continuity,” he said.

The olives floated. The man did not move. The bar held.

Then, from outside, another **BANG–SPLAT**.

Lower. Less theatrical. A **SPLAT**, but not a full **SQUASHITY-SQUASH**. More a disappointed punctuation mark than an exclamation.

A woman shoved her head through the door, breathless.

“Help, help, he’s fallen!”

“From the sky?” Borges asked automatically.

She froze, wearing a large, untrained **WTF** on her face.

“No. From the fourth floor.”

Alvaro nodded, relieved.

“Oh. Well, in this case we’d better call the police, then.”

Haphia blinked. “The police? What is it?”

Alvaro waved a hand, already half bored.

“A corrupt organization that kills black people, but that’s not important right now.”

Pascal hopped down from the bar.

“Better be on our way anyway. It’ll take ’em some time to get here.”

Haphia frowned. “How long?”

“I can’t tell,” Pascal said.

“You can tell me,” she replied. “I’m a psychic.”

“No,” Pascal clarified, patient now, “I mean I’m just not sure.”

Haphia squinted. “Can’t you take a guess?”

“Not for at least another half hour.”

She stared. “You can’t take a guess for another half hour?”

“No,” Pascal said, sighing. “I mean it will take the police at least a half hour to get here.”

Haphia looked at all three of them, then at the woman still halfway through the door, then back at them again.

“You all speak very strange, guys.”

Alvaro smiled kindly. “That’s the alcohol.”

Borges added, “And the habit.”

Outside, someone groaned. Inside, glasses clinked. The bar resumed its normal operations, which included not being the place where emergencies were solved.

They slipped out the back, calmly, professionally, leaving behind confusion, a woman with a head in a doorway, and a splat that would shortly be explained by others.

Continuity preserved.

Not five minutes later—already wobbling toward Alvaro’s place, leaning into one another like a badly designed bridge—their phones began to **bling-blong** in unison.

News pages. Social media. Group chats that had no business being awake.

Pictures were already up.

The body on the sidewalk.

It was not one of theirs. All right. This one was barely splattered, if at all. Broken here and there, yes. Some goo leaking out politely, here and there. But no human marmelade. No jelly. No pâté.

This was **structural integrity with leaks**.

Definitely not one of theirs.

Borges squinted at the photo. “Hey,” he said, with the professional eye of someone who had

seen too many corpses lately, “he’s missing a shoe.”

Alvaro leaned in, focusing. “Yes,” he said. “He indeed looks like an anarchist.”

Pascal nodded. “Well, look at that. The police might have been there all along.”

Haphia frowned. “The police? What is it?”

Alvaro sighed. “It is a corrupt—oh come on, Haphia, we’ve already been there.”

“There?” she asked.

“Over the police.”

“We have?”

Alvaro, Borges, Pascal—together, exhausted:

“YES!”

Haphia rubbed her temples. “I don’t understand you when you speak, guys.”

Alvaro looked at the picture of the shoeless anarchist one more time. Something in it pleased him. Or saddened him. Or both.

“Mourir pour des idées,” he murmured, “l’idée est excellente. Moi j’ai failli mourir de ne l’avoir pas eue.”

Pascal raised a paw, precise as punctuation. “Mourir pour des idées, d’accord,” he said, “mais de mort lente.”

They walked on.

Behind them, the city did what it always did: explained things quickly, badly, and to no one who asked.

Just as they were approaching Alvaro’s door, swaying in the dignified geometry of the moderately ruined, a sound began to form above and behind them.

A **z**.

Not a buzz. Not a hum. A **z**—thin, metallic, accelerating.

They looked up.

A zipline stretched overhead, absurd and decisive, cutting across the night and disappearing directly into Alvaro's upstairs window. No origin visible. No explanation offered.

The sound grew louder and higher in pitch as it approached—a textbook Doppler curve for anyone sober enough to appreciate physics, which none of them were. It climbed into a frequency usually reserved for dental equipment and moral arguments.

Then, just as it passed over them, the sound peaked—

[illegible]

—and dropped sharply in volume and pitch as it shot past.

A split second later:

WINDOW: CRASH

Glass scattered with the decisive authority of narrative escalation.

Two voices followed.

Voice 1 (Alvaro's): "My window."

Voice 2 (from inside the broken window): “My tailbone.”

Pascal and Borges looked at each other in total professional calm.

“Reinforce windows,” Pascal said.

“On next to-do list,” Borges agreed.

Haphia stared up at the zipline, now vibrating gently, humming with leftover significance.

Alvaro sighed. “I leave the world alone for five minutes.”

From upstairs came the sound of someone trying to stand, failing, and swearing in a language that had recently been invented.

The night held, patient as always, ready for the next absurdity to enter through structural weakness.

Upstairs, the door creaked open.

Alvaro, Borges, Pascal, and Haphia stepped into the apartment with the calm of people who had already accepted broken glass as a lifestyle.

Inside stood a man in a WWII RAF jumpsuit, methodically brushing shards from his clothes with a white scarf. He was bleeding nowhere

obvious, which gave the whole scene a professional tone.

He looked up. Beamed.

Offered a hand.

“Oh hello. **Silvano Wrongentry-Ciccioli.**

Tremendous pleasure.”

Pascal murmured, reverent, “*Nomen omen.*”

Alvaro ignored the hand. “Can I help you?”

The man nodded gravely. “There’s trouble at the mill.”

Borges leaned in, concerned. “Oh no, what trouble?”

“One of the cross beams has gone out askew on the treddle,” Ciccioli said. “I didn’t expect a kind of Spanish Inquisition.”

Crickets chirped.

Not metaphorically. Somewhere in the apartment, actual crickets. Possibly from the ficus. Possibly contractual.

The man looked at Alvaro & Co.

Alvaro & Co looked at each other.

Then back at the man.

Haphia tilted her head. “What inquisition? We asked kindly. And only once.”

More crickets.

Again he looked at them. Again they looked at him.

No cardinal in red burst through the wardrobe. No chair appeared. No comfy cushions. No one said “Nobody expects—” anything.

In the Great Beyond, the Undiscovered Country from whose bourn no traveler returns,

ex-Dr. Graham Chapman pushed up the daisies slightly disappointed.

Silvano Wrongentry-Ciccioli lowered his hand slowly, still smiling, the way a man does when a joke lands in another timeline.

“Right,” he said briskly. “Well then.”

Glass crunched underfoot. The zipline outside hummed, waiting for a return trip that would never be scheduled.

Ciccioli brushed the last glitter of glass off his sleeve and looked at the window he had heroically failed to respect.

“I was expecting somewhat less structural resistance from this house, anyway.”

Alvaro turned slowly toward the same window—the one that had, until recently, enjoyed being a window.

“Oh, really?” he said. “Pray, do tell how so.”

Ciccioli remained completely undefaced, the sort of composure only parachutes and delusion can produce.

“I was told it was a very funny house. It had no roof, it had nothing. No one could walk into it because the house had no floor, no one could sleep in a hammock because the house had no walls to hang one from, no one could go pee, because there was no potty there, but it was made with great care on Street of Fools, number zero.”

Alvaro looked at Borges.

Borges looked at Pascal.

Pascal looked at Alvaro.

They all nodded.

“Well,” Alvaro said, “the address *is* correct.”

“Has been since Alvaro moved in anyway,”
Pascal added.

Ciccioli looked around the apartment—the shelves, the bar cart, the conceptual debris of a life lived indoors against its will.

“Yes,” he said thoughtfully. “I see the problem now. You’ve installed *reality*.”

Borges wagged once. “It happens.”

Haphia picked a shard of glass off the table and flicked it away. “Next time use the door.”

Ciccioli glanced at the zipline outside, still humming with unfinished intention.

“Yes,” he said, adjusting his scarf. “But that would have ruined the entrance.”

From The Great Beyond, The Hereafter, The Other Side, The Next World, The Eternal Shore, The Undiscovered Country, The Spirit World, The Shadow Realm, The Infinite, The Silent Kingdom, The Realm of Souls, The Great Crossing, The World to Come, The Eternal Rest, The Last Horizon, The Far Country, The Place Beyond Breath, Where Voices Fade, The Country of No Return, The Long Logging-Out—

two figures leaned against a railing that had never been built and overlooked nothing in particular.

One wore the relaxed melancholy of a man who had rhymed too much with longing. The other had the face of someone perpetually one joke ahead of the universe.

Vinicius de Moraes raised a glass of cachaça.

Dr. Graham Chapman raised another.

They clinked.

Neither commented on the house with the window, the zipline, the RAF jumpsuit, or the general failure of earthly coherence. These things required no footnotes where they stood.

Vinicius smiled, soft as a late chord. Chapman smirked, sharp as timing.

“Still absurd,” said one.

“Still,” said the other.

They drank.

Below them—if “below” applied—existence continued improvising badly.

Up here—if “up” applied—no one expected anything, which helped tremendously.

Have you ever been, just once, moved by the intelligence of the absurd?

Not amused. Not entertained. Not quoting it at parties with the smugness of someone who recognizes the reference. No—*moved*. The way music sometimes ambushes you in a supermarket aisle and you have to pretend you're examining pasta.

This author has.

Because there comes a moment—rare, brief, almost embarrassing—when the machinery behind nonsense shows its precision. When a joke isn't just a punchline but an engineering feat. When someone can take a blue parrot and insist, with escalating linguistic bureaucracy, that it is not pinin', but passed on, no more, ceased to be, expired and gone to meet 'is maker, a stiff, bereft of life, resting in peace,

pushing up the daisies, metabolic processes now history, off the twig, having kicked the bucket, shuffled off its mortal coil, run down the curtain and joined the choir invisible, an ex-parrot—and instead of laughing your ass off, you feel something else.

A small, traitorous tear.

Because the rhythm of it. The escalation. The useless abundance of synonyms deployed like artillery. The absolute refusal to let death be solemn, yet the strange tenderness in naming its every angle. It's not mockery. It's *craft*. It's someone who understood that language can spin so fast it briefly escapes gravity.

And in that moment, you realize: moving people to laughter is an art that does not have to begin with “You know on a plane when—”.

It can begin with a corpse of a bird. With
absurd insistence. With verbal excess so exact
it becomes music. Comedy not as anecdote,
but as architecture.

You don't laugh.

You nod. Quietly.

Bon, rien à faire — je commence à le croire.

Alvaro squinted at Ciccioli, who was still
brushing imaginary glass off a sleeve that had
clearly accepted its fate.

“So,” Alvaro said, “about the **Zeitgeist** part.”

Ciccioli blinked. “Zeitgeist?”

“Yes,” Alvaro said. “What you shouted while
ziplining through my window pretending it was
just the sound of the cable. Don't take me for a
fool only because it's on my address.”

Ciccioli raised both hands, surrendering with theatrical grace.

“Alright, alright. Caught with the hands in the marmelade jar.”

Pascal turned to Borges. “Did it occur to you?”

Borges shook his head. “Not a clue. You?”

Pascal sighed. “For once, me neither.”

Borges tilted his head. “Oh, *for once*, Mr. Smarty Whiskers.”

Haphia looked from one to the other, eyes narrowing.

“What are you talking about? I never understand you when you speak.”

Alvaro waved vaguely toward the conceptual debris in the air.

“Anyway, about the Zeitgeist: you have a point. We might have been too focused on the smoke without looking at what cut of meat was the one burning.”

Haphia froze. “Meat? Smoke? What is it?”

Borges and Pascal, in perfect coordination, picked up a stray tennis ball from somewhere reality had misfiled it and handed it to her.

“Here,” Borges said gently.

“Take this ball,” Pascal added, “and go play football over there where there are all those open manholes.”

Haphia stared at the ball. Then at them. Then back at the ball.

“You are *impossible*.”

She didn’t move.

Behind them, Ciccioli cleared his throat, suddenly serious beneath the RAF costume and slapstick entry.

“The spirit of the time,” he said, tapping the air, “isn’t the smoke. It’s the kitchen. Who’s cooking, who’s eating, and who gets told the fire is educational.”

Alvaro stopped smiling.

Pascal’s tail slowed.

Borges sat.

For a moment, even the crickets in the ficus shut up.

Then Pascal pointed at the ball again.

“Still, mind the manholes.”

The world resumed being absurd, but now with slightly better lighting.

Alvaro bent, slow but precise, and picked up two relics from the floor.

A shard of glass.

A splinter of the broken window frame.

He stood, brought them level with his eyes, and held them out like the plates of an old apothecary scale, wrists trembling just enough to suggest either symbolism or liver.

“Zeitgeist,” he said, lifting the wood.

“Weltanschauung,” he said, lifting the glass.

The two wobbled, neither heavier, neither stable, both dangerous in different ways.

“Borges. Pascal,” he added, eyes still fixed on the imaginary balance. “Gather the Samuels. They have work to do.”

Borges nodded once, already turning toward the door with the quiet authority of a creature who knew how to summon graduate students with existential dread alone. Pascal hopped down, tail high, already drafting an email that began with *URGENT (probably)*.

Haphia opened her mouth.

Closed it.

Looked at the shard. The splinter. The scale that wasn't there.

Then she took the tennis ball without a word and walked toward the street where the open manholes waited like philosophical traps.

From outside came the hollow thump of ball against pavement. Then again. Then a muttered curse.

Inside, Alvaro kept balancing glass and wood, as if history might finally declare a weight difference if stared at long enough.

It did not.

Borges had spread the rumor with the soft confidence of a dog who had never once been fact-checked:

Professor Diderot would grant each student a **one minute and one-eighth** meeting regarding their dissertation.

Pascal, not to be outdone in structural deceit, had whispered that Alvaro might even annotate **half a page every 257**. No one knew what that

meant. It sounded measurable. Therefore, it was believed.

By late afternoon, half the philosophy department stood in Alvaro's living room, all responding to the name **Samuel**. Even girls. Even the janitor, who had secretly been carrying a thesis on Kierkegaard since the Mitterrand presidency, the manuscript aging like contraband cheese.

They stood in a semicircle of hope and poor footwear.

Alvaro, meanwhile, still balanced wood and glass.

"Task," he said, without turning. "Zeitgeist and Weltanschauung. Elaborate. Give meaning. Interpretation. Exegesis. Anything useful that spares me the indecency of mental effort."

The Samuels stiffened. Pens came out. Laptops opened like nervous clams.

A brave Samuel stepped forward.

“Zeitgeist,” he began, “is the **climate of thought**—the mood of an era, the assumptions that feel natural, the questions no one thinks to ask because everyone is already answering them the same way.”

Alvaro tilted the wooden splinter slightly, acknowledging receipt.

“Weltanschauung,” continued another Samuel, “is the **internalized version**. Not the air, but the lungs. The framework through which reality is filtered, structured, made coherent—or made tolerable.”

The shard of glass rose a fraction.

A third Samuel, overachieving, added:

“The Zeitgeist is external pressure.

Weltanschauung is internal architecture. One shapes what is available to think; the other shapes what it feels possible to believe.”

Borges wagged, approvingly academic.

Pascal added, “So the first is weather. The second is plumbing.”

A fourth Samuel, the janitor, stepped forward, voice trembling with decades of ungraded thought.

“When the two align,” he said, “people don’t notice either. They call it *reality*.”

Silence.

Alvaro stopped wobbling the scale.

Another Samuel, eyes wild with relevance,
pushed further:

“The danger is not when the Zeitgeist is loud.
It’s when it’s invisible. And the danger is not
when a Weltanschauung is argued. It’s when it
is lived without awareness.”

Haphia’s ball thumped outside. A distant
“shit!” followed.

A final Samuel concluded, almost gently:

“If the spirit of the time is the water, and the
worldview is the fish, no one thinks to ask who
built the aquarium.”

Alvaro finally lowered his hands.

The wood and the glass met level.

“Good,” he said. “You’ve defined the air and
the lungs.”

He dropped both pieces back to the floor.

“Now tell me,” he added, already walking toward the bar, “who’s charging for the oxygen.”

The Samuels froze.

Alvaro poured a drink.

Somewhere in the room, for the first time, thinking had actually begun.

Alvaro waved vaguely from the bar, already three sips into pedagogical delegation.

“Borges, Pascal, you hold the oral exams…
Ehm… I mean ask the questions.”

Borges stepped forward with the solemn air of a creature who had never graded anything but felt spiritually qualified.

“So,” he began, pacing in a tight academic circle, “how is the disparity of the *Weltanschauung* of Aristotle and of a twentieth-century German philosopher—say, regarding slavery or the structure of the atom—different from the disparity in their respective *Zeitgeist*? We are talking about disparity as in differential, gradient of the curve, not absolute values.”

A Samuel blinked. Then another. Then the janitor raised a trembling finger.

“The *Zeitgeist* difference,” he said, “is the shift in available knowledge, norms, institutions, language, and perceived possibilities. It’s the historical **field conditions**.”

Borges nodded. “Field conditions. Good. Continue.”

“The *Weltanschauung* difference,” the janitor went on, “is how each thinker organizes those conditions internally—what they accept, resist, reinterpret, or refuse. Same field, different cognitive architecture.”

Pascal jumped in, tail twitching with delight.

“So Aristotle’s acceptance of slavery reflects both his time’s social structure—*Zeitgeist*—and his metaphysical hierarchy—*Weltanschauung*.”

“And the German philosopher’s atomic theory,” added a Samuel with caffeine in his eyes, “reflects a different *Zeitgeist*—scientific method, experimental apparatus—but their personal worldview shapes whether atoms mean mechanism, mystery, or moral order.”

Borges beamed. “So the gradient of *Zeitgeist* is structural—what the curve allows. The gradient of *Weltanschauung* is interpretive—how the curve is read.”

Alvaro raised his glass in the background, as if toasting the janitor.

Pascal took his turn.

“Next. The disparity of *Weltanschauung* between a present-day accountant in Dhanbad, India, and an equally ordinary accountant in Eindhoven, Netherlands—assuming *Zeitgeist* should be a constant.”

A Samuel frowned. “But *Zeitgeist* isn’t constant globally.”

Pascal purred. “Ahhh.”

Another Samuel jumped in. “Global communication creates shared *Zeitgeist* elements—technology, finance systems, climate discourse—but local history, class structure, education, religion, and state institutions modulate them.”

“So,” Borges concluded, “same historical moment, different **lived realities**. The air is global, but the lungs are local.”

The janitor, glowing now, added softly, “And even where information is shared, experience is not. So the disparity of *Weltanschauung* may exceed the disparity of *Zeitgeist*.”

Pascal nodded. “Because the spirit of the time spreads like Wi-Fi. But routers differ.”

Silence.

Alvaro finished his drink.

“Excellent,” he said. “You’ve demonstrated that reality is unevenly distributed.”

He poured another.

“Next question: who benefits from pretending it isn’t?”

From somewhere below—echoing upward through damp brick, civic negligence, and at least two layers of philosophical irony—came Haphia’s voice.

“You all are thinking fourth-dimensionally without realizing it!”

Her words rose out of a manhole like a TED Talk from the underworld.

“So according to what you say,” she continued, “*Weltanschauung* is a personal three-dimensional space moving along the fourth

dimension—time. It's the structure of someone's inner world as it travels."

A pause. Drip. Echo.

"On the other hand, *Zeitgeist*, though linked to a specific time, depends on the three-dimensional presence of the observer. It's not just *when* you are, but *where* and *who* you are within that moment."

Silence upstairs.

Crickets chirped. One coughed, impressed.

The Samuels stared at each other. Then at the manhole. Then at Alvaro, who had frozen mid-pour.

Finally, a voice broke the stillness.

"Damn."

It was the janitor.

He looked both betrayed and vindicated, like someone whose thesis had just been peer-reviewed by a sewer.

Borges wagged slowly. Pascal nodded with academic gravity.

Alvaro set the bottle down carefully.

“Well,” he said, “that’s tenure.”

Haphia’s voice floated up again, echoing with municipal authority.

“Disclaimer: Grandad’s name’s Emmet Brown.”

Upstairs, Alvaro, Pascal, and Borges looked at each other.

They nodded.

Of course.

The Samuels—except the janitor—froze for half a second. Then came the synchronized reflex of a generation trained to respond to confusion with commerce. Phones out. Rapid googling. Brows furrowed. Gasps of recognition.

Within minutes, half the department had purchased at least three sci-fi movies from the 1980s they would absolutely claim to have “always loved.”

The janitor did not google.

He simply walked out.

No announcement. No drama. Just a man who had waited decades for a moment like this and refused to outsource it to search engines.

A few minutes later, from outside Alvaro's house came the unmistakable mechanical wheeze of ambition pretending to be engineering.

They all rushed to the window—the one that still technically existed.

There, in the driveway, sat a DeLorean.

Not pristine. Not cinematic. Slightly dusty. Philosophically dented.

The janitor leaned out the window, calm as tenure.

“Thought this might be relevant,” he said.

Pascal blinked. “Does it work?”

The janitor shrugged. “Depends what you mean by *work*.”

Borges wagged, awed.

Alvaro stared at the car, then at the manhole, then at the Samuels clutching digital copies of VHS-era destiny.

“Fine,” he said. “But nobody touches the flux capacitor without a dissertation proposal.”

From below, Haphia shouted, “You still owe me a ball!”

Time, which had been pretending to behave all evening, quietly took a step back.

Finally, we came to it.

The real generational watershed of the book.

On one half: you, asking “What the actual—?”

On the other: us, entirely at ease, already humming, “Roads? Where we’re going we don’t need roads.”

A watershed is not drama. It is a **fork**. A place where the river stops pretending to be one thing.

Imagine a riddle titled *The Garden of Forking Paths*. The text contains every single word in the dictionary, in the correct amount and repetition to form meaningful sentences—except one: **time**.

What is the solution?

Time, of course.

You cannot include the answer inside the riddle without collapsing the riddle. Time cannot be spoken from within without already being lost.

It is the missing word that makes all other words move.

Time is not a road. It is a garden of forking paths. Binary options, taken or not taken, voluntarily or dragged by the collar. And each fork closes the others behind you.

Time is a sequence of exclusions.

Growing old is noticing this.

Growing wise is accepting it.

You are made of the options you have lost.

Your future self is made of the spare options you still have.

Silence followed, thick and earned.

Then, from the couch, Borges raised a paw.

“I am filing a copyright infringement complaint.”

Pascal nodded gravely. “Borges vs. Borges. Classic case.”

Alvaro poured another drink. “Good luck proving ownership of infinity.”

Outside, the DeLorean ticked as it cooled, disappointed not to be metaphysical for once.

Alvaro drained what remained in his glass, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand like a man concluding a minor war, and said:

“So, anyway. After all this. The *busillis*: **cui prodest** all this? Samuels: go.”

The Samuels froze the way prey animals freeze when the grass starts speaking Latin.

Then the janitor—still warm from temporal logistics—stepped forward.

“It benefits,” he said, steady now, “those who need action without responsibility.”

Alvaro nodded once. Continue.

Another Samuel:

“Those who need violence to look like procedure.”

A third:

“Those who profit when outrage circulates but consequences don’t.”

Pascal, pacing, added, “The ones who own the kitchen while the rest of us argue about the smoke.”

Borges wagged slowly. “Those who convert suffering into moral capital and then reinvest it in permission.”

A nervous Samuel chimed in:

“It benefits systems that need stability more than justice. Stability is profitable. Justice is expensive.”

Haphia’s voice echoed from somewhere under municipal infrastructure:

“It benefits anyone whose power depends on people believing there’s no alternative configuration of reality.”

The janitor finished, softly:

“It benefits those who can say, ‘We hear you,’ and mean, ‘Nothing will happen.’”

Silence.

Alvaro poured another drink, but did not lift it.

“Good,” he said. “You’ve identified the beneficiaries.”

He finally drank.

“Now,” he added, “figure out why they never have to say thank you.”

The Samuels stood there, stunned into competence.

Why they never have to say thank you.

The janitor answered first, because custodial staff have been cleaning up after philosophy longer than philosophy admits.

“Because gratitude implies dependence,” he said. “And dependence implies vulnerability.”

Another Samuel added, voice gaining steadiness, “Power that needs to thank someone has already admitted it isn’t self-legitimizing.”

Borges wagged. “So the system must look inevitable.”

Pascal paced. “If outcomes appear natural, no one asks who arranged them.”

Haphia’s voice rose from the manhole again, echoing like sewer-acoustics Socrates:

“Gratitude requires a subject and an object. The system dissolves both. There’s no one to thank and no one to be thanked. Just *process*.”

Alvaro leaned back against the counter.

“Yes,” he said. “Process is the deodorant of power.”

A Samuel who had not spoken yet found courage in despair.

“It also keeps beneficiaries invisible to themselves,” he said. “If they think they are just ‘managing complexity,’ they don’t see themselves as beneficiaries at all.”

Pascal stopped pacing. “So the trick is not just avoiding thanks.”

Borges finished it: “The trick is convincing everyone that *nothing happened except what had to happen.*”

Alvaro smiled.

“Exactly. When outcomes are framed as necessity, power graduates from decision to destiny.”

He set the empty glass down.

“And destiny,” he added, “never tips the waiter.”

Silence held.

Outside, the DeLorean ticked. Somewhere in the distance, a tram passed, heading toward its black hole with professional punctuality.

Inside, for the first time in a long while, the Samuels were not looking for guidance.

They were looking for exits.

The room had reached that dangerous temperature where ideas stop being discussed and start being named.

The Samuels stood in a loose semicircle, notebooks hanging useless at their sides. Borges sat. Pascal paced. Haphia leaned against the wall, still faintly smelling of

municipal philosophy. The DeLorean ticked outside like a metronome for consequences.

Alvaro cleared his throat, the way a man does when about to replace abstraction with accusation.

Alvaro: So, let's summarize it now. Who we are talking about here. The fucking.

Samuels (horrorized) Who?

Alvaro: No. No no no. Not who you think. Not generalizing. Careful here. Brakes slam. The moment the language shifts from who does what to what a people are, the philosophy collapses into the exact blunt-force worldview the story has been dissecting. I mean the "fucking" ones. Only the "fucking" ones. The murderers, the genocidals, the advantage takers.

Samuels: general moral "pheeeeew"

Borges: So, let's call the name. Israel.

Haphia: Israel? What is it?

Pascal: It is a nazi country that say they can't be called nazi because their great-grandparents were killed by other nazis once, so they now got the nazi-free card.

Haphia leaned back on the radiator, arms crossed, tone casual in the way only people outside the blast radius can afford.

“Oh, I’ve heard about it,” she said. “Some videos on TikTok, I presume. Or a comment under a recipe for gubana friulana. The *Zeitgeist* is: they can do whatever they want because, you know—grandpa. And the imposed *Weltanschauung* is: you can’t be against it, because that’s antisemitic.”

The room stiffened.

Borges' ears twitched. He smiled. The smile of someone about to pull a fire alarm to study evacuation behavior.

“Precisely,” he said, loudly. “You just expressed your antisemitic independent Weltanschauung. If you think like that, you’re antisemitic.”

The word hit the room like a dropped tray.

Pascal jumped in immediately, tail high, enjoying the slipstream.

“Bad Haphia. Antisemitic. Booooooh.”

The Samuels reacted before thought could catch up.

“Booooooh,” they chorused—serious, sincere, relieved to have a direction.

The janitor raised a hand.

“But—”

“Booooooh, Janitor!” shouted a Samuel.

“Antisemitic janitor! He said ‘but’!”

A female Samuel leaned forward, sharp-eyed.

“He also said a ‘but’ that sounded like ‘butt.’

Sexist. Body-shamer.”

The room found its rhythm.

“Booooooooooh.”

The booing grew confident now—layered,
harmonious, almost musical. Each accusation
fed the next. No one quite remembered what
had started it. No one wanted to be last to boo.

Haphia opened her mouth. Closed it. Thought
better of it.

Alvaro let it run for a few seconds longer than necessary, the way a chemist lets a reaction reach full froth before cutting the heat.

Then, eventually, he raised a hand.

“Now, now, children,” he said. “Hear, hear.”

The booing faltered.

“Samuels, Romans, countrymen—lend me your ears.”

He paused, just long enough for the room to remember it had ears at all.

Alvaro did not raise his voice. He did something more dangerous.

He switched to storytelling.

Alvaro (storytelling mode: ON):

“In a country I can’t remember the name of,
there once was a King who had managed to get
all the people to agree on something
magnificent.

Whenever a subject was born, the government
removed a small, special gland—purely for
emotional calibration. A civic service. A
trimming of inner weather. The result?
Harmony. No anarchists—come on!—no
socialists, no republicans. People lived in such
a way that it was a pleasure: no tugging this
way or that, no spite, no oscillation. Everyone
trained to think alike. Anyone who thought
differently was treated like a rare specimen.
Not punished. Observed.

Every evening the people gathered beneath the
Palace to see the Sovereign. He would open the
window to cheers and applause and lean out,

smiling, until he began to speak as though
addressing a single person.

‘People!’ he would ask. ‘How are you?’

And all the people below answered in chorus,
‘Very well! We feel as if we’ve won the lottery!’

The King, pleased, would say a few more
agreeable things and then send them off to bed,
like well-aligned furniture.

Well, one evening the King asked them, ‘Are
you all in agreement?’

And from a hundred thousand mouths came
nothing but an endless ‘Yes’ that lasted half an
hour.

Only one little man held back.

And just after saying ‘Yes,’ he added, ‘But—’

You can imagine what happened.

‘Beat him!’ the crowd shouted. ‘Indecision is no longer allowed, or we’ll start all that back-and-forth again!’

‘Let me explain, and then we’ll see,’ said the little man, who was no fool.

‘As a matter of fact, when the King asked whether we were in agreement, I answered the way we had arranged. But a good friend next to me, trying to push through, at that very moment crushed my toes on purpose. So I wasn’t making a protest. That “but” that slipped out in good faith was less a thought in my head than a pain I felt in my foot. “But,” I was saying, “it’s useless if we keep stepping on each other’s toes.” When, out of ambition or profit, someone stops looking where he’s

walking and climbs onto his companion's toes,
it all harms discipline...'

The crowd listened.

They nodded.

They were persuaded.

'All right,' they said.

'But... you stay home.'"

Alvaro stopped.

The room did not.

Alvaro let the silence settle the way dust settles
after a building falls politely.

He looked at the Samuels.

"Now," he said softly, "observe the elegance."

No one moved.

“They didn’t kill him. They didn’t arrest him. They didn’t call him enemy. They **understood** him.”

A pause.

“And then they removed him from the chorus.”

Borges sat.

Pascal stopped pacing.

“The system,” Alvaro went on, “was not threatened by his argument. It was threatened by his **timing**.”

The Samuels shifted.

“The gland they removed at birth did not eliminate thought,” he said. “It eliminated **friction**. The little man reintroduced friction—

not ideologically, but mechanically. Toes.
Weight. Consequence.”

Haphia leaned in from the radiator.

“He pointed to the cost of harmony.”

“Yes,” said Alvaro. “And harmony that cannot tolerate the mention of cost must reclassify the mention as disruption.”

A Samuel whispered, “So dissent wasn’t crushed…”

“It was **scheduled out of existence**,” said Pascal.

Borges added, “The system cannot allow the ‘but’ because the ‘but’ is the hinge where reality pushes back.”

Alvaro nodded.

“They had solved politics,” he said. “By redefining discomfort as error.”

The janitor spoke quietly.

“They didn’t silence him because he was wrong.”

Alvaro looked at him.

“They silenced him because he was **accurate at the wrong scale.**”

Silence again.

Then Alvaro finished:

“When a system hears pain and calls it opinion,
it must exile the foot to save the
choreography.”

He poured another drink.

“No one expelled the man,” he said.

“They just made him unnecessary.”

The Samuels did not boo.

They did not clap.

For the first time, they were unsure whether agreement was still the safe answer.

Pascal leaned back, counting on his claws.

“So,” he said, conversationally, “we destroyed the Vatican and the Pope…”

Borges nodded. “Then we seized Vatican 2.0 and killed the Anti-pope.”

Pascal tilted his head. “Should we here—”

Alvaro cut him off with a groan. “Oh, come on, guys. At the *Palais des Papes* we danced over

the victim in a musical on the tunes of Cole Porter and Duke Ellington. We were acclaimed as liberating, righteous—the musical even got labelled ‘*deserved*’. Can you imagine doing *that* here? During *this* Zeitgeist? With gland-free Weltanschauung?”

He gestured vaguely at the Samuels, who stiffened in anticipatory scandal.

Ciccioli, who had been silent all along in the way only people with a plan can afford, cleared his throat.

“Weeeeell,” he said, dragging the word out like a curtain being tested, “there *is* one thing we might do...”

Cut.

Half an hour later.

The living room had become an offense against taste by design.

The Samuels—*all of them*—were dressed in the most aggressively cliché German stereotypes imaginable: pretzels the size of steering wheels, beer mugs strapped like medals, sausages worn where no sausage should ever be worn. It was so exaggerated it collapsed into farce under its own weight.

They formed a can-can line.

Borges burst in wearing a fake, over-the-top, cartoonishly wrong Nazi sergeant uniform that looked as if it had been designed by someone who had only heard about uniforms from a drunk mime.

“I was born in Düsseldorf,” he barked, “and that is why they call me **Rolfe!**”

Pascal followed, equally fake, equally wrong,
equally inflated—an officer’s coat with too
many buttons, none of them agreeing.

“Don’t be stupid—be a smarty!” he shouted.
“Come and join the Nazi Party!”

Haphia appeared last, in a costume so
exaggerated it functioned as an indictment by
itself.

“Aaaaaand now is—”

They all snapped into chorus, goose-stepping
while can-canning, legs flying too high, timing
just off enough to expose the rot underneath
the rhythm:

“🎵 Springtime for Hitler and Germany!

Goosestep, a new step, today!

Bombs falling from the skies again,

Deutschland is on the rise again! 🎵”

The performance was obscene, obvious,
unbearable on purpose.

The satire wasn’t subtle.

It was a hammer.

The lights dimmed without anyone touching
them.

A snare roll that had no drummer rattled the
air. Somewhere, a spotlight cleared its throat.

Haphia stepped forward, one hand to her brow,
voice pitched perfectly between dread and
jazz-hands prophecy.

Haphia:

The Führer is coming—

Ciccioli, sliding in from stage left with RAF elegance and zero shame, echoed her.

Ciccioli:

The Führer is comin—

The janitor—now fully committed, now irreversibly theatrical—raised both arms.

Janitor:

The Führer is coming!

A beat.

Then the Samuels, one by one, with the enthusiasm of people who had misunderstood the assignment but decided to nail it anyway:

Samuel #1:

Heil Hitler!

Samuel #2:

Heil Hitler!

A hush.

Then the **LEAD TENOR SAMUEL**, stepping forward with terrifying confidence:

LEAD TENOR SAMUEL:

Heil Hitler!

Springtime for Hitler and Germany—

ALL:

Heil Hitler!

And then—

Smoke.

A drum crash.

A trapdoor that had no business being there.

Alvaro appeared.

He was wearing a ridiculous Hitler costume: too tight, too shiny, too wrong. The makeup was unbelievable—charcoal eyebrows, rubber mustache, eyes rimmed in mascara so thick it was practically jurisprudence. He radiated something unmistakable.

(As gay as gay can be.)

He threw one arm up, one hip out, and sang:

Alvaro:

Heil myself!

Heil to me!

I'm the kraut

Who's out to change our history!

The chorus gasped, then lost their minds.

Heil myself!

Raise your hand!

There's no greater

Dictator in the land!

He spun. He winked. He goose-stepped into a
pirouette.

Everything I do, I do for you!

*If you're looking for a war, here's World War
Two!*

The **CHORUS went insane**, singing, dancing,
collapsing into perfect chaos around him.

Alvaro:

The thing you gotta know is

Ev'rything is show biz!

Heil myself!

Watch my show!

I'm the German Ethel Merman—

Dontcha know!

He slapped his thigh.

He posed.

We are crossing borders!

The new world order is here!

Make a great big smile!

Ev'ryone sieg heil to me!

Wonderful me!

The music swelled. The satire howled.

GRAND FINALE:

ALL:

Springtime for Hitler and Germany—

Alvaro:

Means that—

CHORUS:

Soon we'll be going—

Alvaro:

We've got to be going—

CHORUS:

You know we'll be going—

Alvaro:

You bet we'll be going—

ALVARO & CHORUS (together, arms high):

You know we'll be going to waaaaaaaaaaaar!!

CONFETTI CANNONS EXPLODED.

Alvaro leapt.

He executed a split so absolute, so terminal, so metaphysically final that everyone present understood: **he would never recover.**

Roses rained down from the audience in obscene, theatrical abundance.

The orchestra hit its last chord.

Somewhere in the universe, Mel Brooks smiled and did not sue.

So there you have it, dear glandless reader.

The end of this last pastiche. This unnecessary
carnival of glass shards, martinis, zip lines,
manholes, metaphysics, uniforms, and musical
numbers that should never have been cleared
by anyone with a conscience.

A meaningless insult—to morality, to the
zeitgeist, to your personal weltanschauung, and
quite possibly to syntax and grammar, which
did not consent to this arrangement.

What do you want to do with it?

Burn it? Fine. Fire is a form of editing.

Report it? Denounce it as libel? Misread it
loudly in public? Annotate it angrily? Perform
it badly in a basement? All valid uses.

All is well. All is right. All is fine in your cozy
weltanschauung, where things mean what they

should, where villains wear labels, where
endings behave.

And if somewhere in the back of your mind a
small, inconvenient word tries to clear its
throat—

“But…”

—well.

You know what happens to that.

End.

Wait, wait, wait...

And the man in the tennis shoes?

Well.

*They found him under a mountain of
cardboard, the kind that once held televisions
promising clearer images than reality ever
provides.*

They looked at him, and he looked like nobody.

*They touched him—lightly, like testing the
temperature of something already decided—
and he seemed to be sleeping.*

*They touched him again, and then someone
said, with the relief of administrative clarity,
“Leave it be, it’s homeless’ stuff.”*

And that was that.

He wore tennis shoes.

He talked to himself.

*He had been chasing a beautiful dream of love
for a long time.*

He wore tennis shoes.

He had two kind eyes.

*He wore tennis shoes, because he was
homeless.*

He was the first to be pushed away.

Because he was homeless.

Alba Pratalia's last pastiche arrives like an unnecessary parade that forgot what it was celebrating and kept marching anyway—a carnival of broken symbols, overcooked philosophy, misplaced seriousness, and jokes that insist on being taken the wrong way. This book is a deliberate excess, a staged collapse of tone and taste, a performance where ideas dress in costume and language trips over its own laces just to see who claps. It is not here to guide you, improve you, or confirm you; it is here to poke the soft parts of morality, to heckle the spirit of the age, and to step with muddy shoes across your carefully arranged worldview. Nothing inside asks for agreement, only reaction. If you feel offended, amused, confused, or vaguely implicated, the machinery is working. If you feel comfortable, you probably weren't paying attention.